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COUNTRY POWER PLAYERS
Country's Cool Again
STARRING
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+
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AND THE LEGEND...
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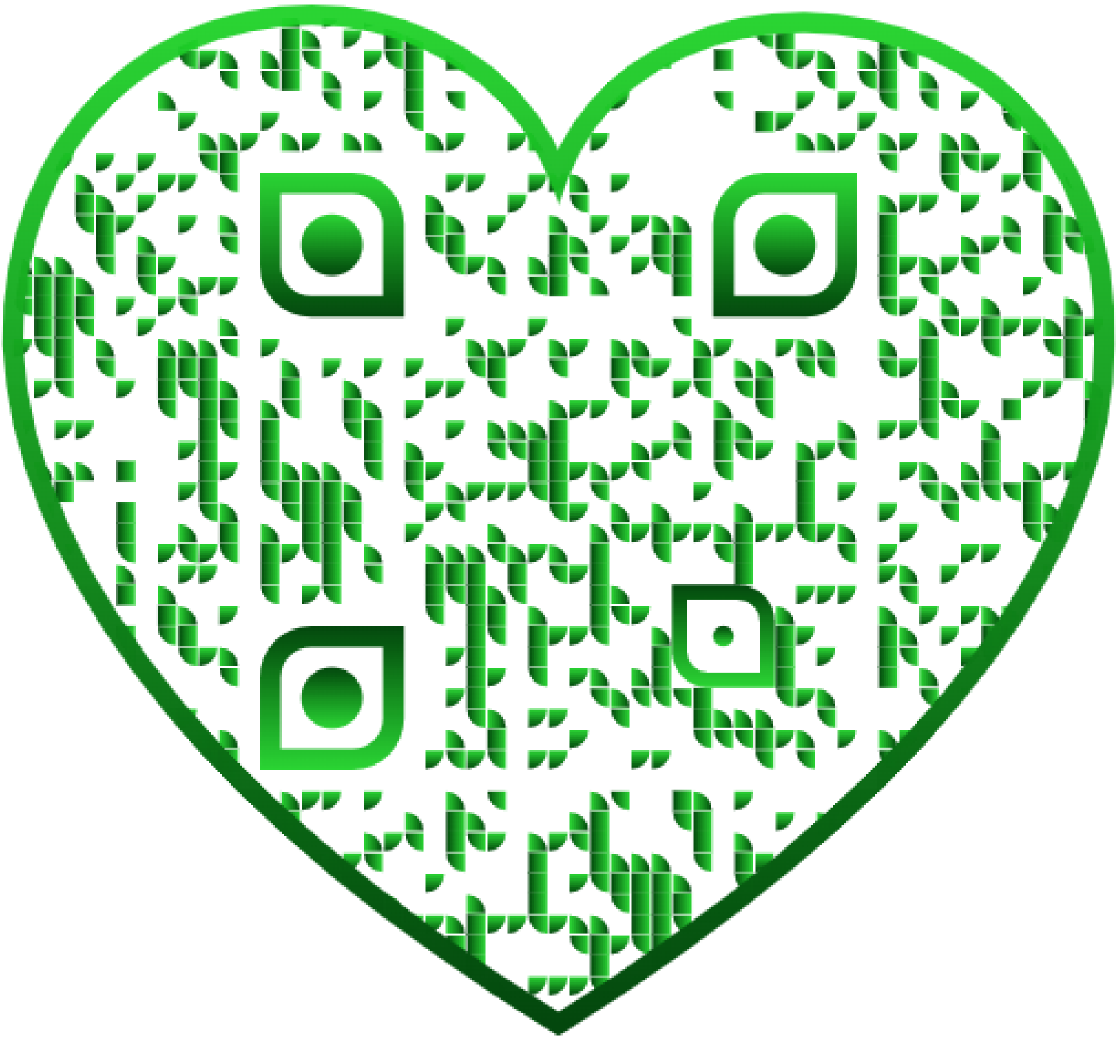

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THE MUSIC GETS YOU DANCING.
BLUE MOON SALOON
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YEAR OF MUSIC 2024
LOUISIANA
Feed Your Soul.
FindYourLouisianaSound.com

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MAY 11, 2024
VOLUME 136
NO. 7

ON THE COVER
Lainey Wilson photographed by Joelle Grace Taylor on March 26 at Paradise Pasadena in Pasadena, Calif.

Nikita Karizma shirt and pants, Double D Ranch and Celeste Starre necklaces, Charlie 1 Horse hat, Modern Myth hat band, Acchitto belt, Alexis Bittar earrings, State Property, Acchitto and Boochier rings.

THIS PAGE
Tanya and Michael Trotter of The War and Treaty photographed by Robby Klein on April 15 at Ryman Auditorium in Nashville.

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Billboard will publish its next issue on June 1. For 24/7 music coverage, go to billboard.com.

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Billboard's 10th annual list, led by Big Loud partner/CEO **Seth England**, honors the top executives across multiple industry sectors who are driving the success of the genre now. Plus: Groundbreaker **The War and Treaty**, Rookie of the Year **Nate Smith** and Legend **Linda Martell**.

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UJA ENTERTAINMENT, TECH & LIFESTYLE

2024 MUSIC VISIONARY OF THE YEAR

RON PERRY

CHAIRMAN & CEO, COLUMBIA RECORDS

MONDAY, JUNE 10 • 11:30 AM
NEW YORK CITY

TICKETS AND JOURNAL ADS

UJA Federation NEW YORK

charts

DATA FOR WEEK OF 5.11.2024

BILLBOARD 200

1

The Tortured Poets Department
Taylor Swift

LAST WEEK	PEAK POSITION	WEEKS ON CHART
1	1	2

Department Of Records: Swift Makes More History

TAYLOR SWIFT CONTINUES to dominate the Billboard 200 and Billboard Hot 100 a week after her debut atop both charts. On the former, *The Tortured Poets Department* became her 14th No. 1, tying her with Jay-Z for the most leaders among soloists in the chart's 68-year history.

The set earned 439,000 equivalent album units in the United States in its second week (ending May 2), according to Luminate, following its 2.6 million-unit opening week. It launched with 1.9 million in domestic album sales and sold 107,000 in its second week, becoming Swift's 11th album to pass 2 million purchases — and her first to reach the milestone after only two weeks of availability. The set looms so large in sales that its sum represents 8.4% of all albums sold in the United States year to date.

Meanwhile, the album's "Fortnight" (featuring Post Malone) rules the Hot 100 for a second week with 38.2 million official streams, 33.3 million radio airplay audience impressions and 6,000 sold. A week earlier, when it debuted as Swift's 12th No. 1 and Post Malone's fifth, she became the first artist to claim the chart's top 14 positions simultaneously — besting her own mark of filling the top 10 in November 2022 with tracks from *Midnights*, her most recent album of all-new material prior to *The Tortured Poets Department*.

On the May 4-dated Hot 100, Swift upped her career count to 59 total top 10s. She also charted 32 songs on the ranking — including all 31 from her new set's deluxe version — another single-week record among women.

—KEITH CAULFIELD AND GARY TRUST

GRAHAM DENHOLM/TAS24/GETTY IMAGES

Hot 100

2 WKS. AGO	LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	Title / PRODUCER (SONGWRITER)	Artist / IMPRINT/PROMOTION LABEL	PEAK POS.	WKS. ON CHART
-	1	1	**#1 for 2 WEEKS** **Fortnight** J.M.ANTONOFF,T.SWIFT (T.SWIFT,J.M.ANTONOFF,A.R.POST)	**Taylor Swift Featuring Post Malone** REPUBLIC	1	2
HOT SHOT DEBUT		2	**Million Dollar Baby** M.VOSSBERG,J.ROY,MANNYVELLI,SPARKHEEM,KAVI (T.RICHMAN)	**Tommy Richman** ISO SUPREMACY/PULSE RECORDS	2	1
36	27	3	**SAL/STM** **A Bar Song (Tipsy)** S.COOK,N.SASTRY (C.O.CHIBUEZE,S.C.COOK,N.SASTRY,J.JONES,J.KENT,M.WILLIAMS)	**Shaboozey** AMERICAN DOGWOOD/EMPIRE/MAGNOLIA MUSIC	3	3
7	22	4	**Espresso** J.BUNETTA (S.CARPENTER,J.C.BUNETTA,A.R.ALLEN,S.N.JONES)	**Sabrina Carpenter** ISLAND/REPUBLIC	4	3
3	15	5	**Beautiful Things** E.BLAIR (B.BOONE,E.BLAIR,J.L.LARSEN)	**Benson Boone** NIGHT STREET/WARNER	2	15
4	18	6	**Lose Control** INFAMOUS,AMMO,J.BUNETTA (J.E.COLEMAN,J.C.BUNETTA,M.RODRIGUEZ-DIAZ,MIKKY EKKO,J.C.DIMSDALE)	**Teddy Swims** SWIMS INT./WARNER	1	38
1	16	7	**Too Sweet** BEKON,PETE G,CHAKRA,A.HOZIER-BYRNE (A.HOZIER-BYRNE,D.TANNENBAUM,P.GONZALES, D.N.KRIEGER,S.A.GHEMAN,S.D.JOHNSON,T.R.MEHLENBACHER)	**Hozier** RUBYWORKS/COLUMBIA	1	6
2	17	8	**Like That** METRO BOOMIN (N.D.WILBURN,L.T.WAYNE,K.L.DUCKWORTH,R.OLIVER,J.COOLEY,K.HOOD,A.TILMON JR.)	**Future, Metro Boomin & Kendrick Lamar** BOOMINATI/FREEBANDZ/REPUBLIC/EPIC	1	6
-	3	9	**I Can Do It With A Broken Heart** J.M.ANTONOFF,T.SWIFT (T.SWIFT,J.M.ANTONOFF)	**Taylor Swift** REPUBLIC	3	2
-	2	10	**Down Bad** J.M.ANTONOFF,T.SWIFT (T.SWIFT,J.M.ANTONOFF)	**Taylor Swift** REPUBLIC	2	2
NEW		11	**Euphoria** SOUNWAVE,CARDO ON THE BEAT,KYRO,JOHNNY JULIANO,YUNG EXCLUSIVE (K.L.DUCKWORTH)	**Kendrick Lamar** PGLANG/INTERSCOPE/ICLG	11	1
10	29	12	**AIR** **Saturn** C.LANG,R.BISEL,SOLOMONOPHONIC,MONSUNE (S.I.ROWE,C.LANG,R.BISEL,J.SOLOMON,S.ZHANG)	**SZA** TOP DAWG/RCA	6	10
-	9	13	**Who's Afraid Of Little Old Me?** J.M.ANTONOFF,T.SWIFT (T.SWIFT)	**Taylor Swift** REPUBLIC	9	2
-	5	14	**So Long, London** A.DESSNER,T.SWIFT (T.SWIFT,A.DESSNER)	**Taylor Swift** REPUBLIC	5	2
6	28	15	**Lovin On Me** OZ,NIK D,S.MOMBERGER (J.T.HARLOW,O.YILDRIM,N.FRASCONA,S.MOMBERGER,N.J.PABON,D.M.GREER, R.NELTON)	**Jack Harlow** GENERATION NOW/ATLANTIC	1	25
-	6	16	**My Boy Only Breaks His Favorite Toys** J.M.ANTONOFF,T.SWIFT (T.SWIFT)	**Taylor Swift** REPUBLIC	6	2
-	19	17	**Push Ups** BOI-1DA,FIERCE,COLEMAN,NOEL (A.GRAHAM,M.J.SAMUELS,NOEL)	**Drake** OVO SOUND/REPUBLIC	17	2
-	7	18	**But Daddy I Love Him** J.M.ANTONOFF,A.DESSNER,T.SWIFT (T.SWIFT,A.DESSNER)	**Taylor Swift** REPUBLIC	7	2
8	33	19	**We Can't Be Friends (Wait For Your Love)** A.GRANDE,MAX MARTIN,ILYA (A.GRANDE,MAX MARTIN,I.SALMANZADEH)	**Ariana Grande** REPUBLIC	1	8
-	8	20	**Florida!!!** J.M.ANTONOFF,T.SWIFT (T.SWIFT,F.L.M.WELCH)	**Taylor Swift Featuring Florence + The Machine** REPUBLIC	8	2

Go to the Chart Beat section of billboard.com for complete charts coverage.

The 19-year-old Philadelphia native's first Hot 100 entry has also scored two weeks at No. 1 on the TikTok Billboard Top 50 chart.

KYLE CLAYTON

HOT 100

58

"Tell Ur Girlfriend"

Lay Bankz

How did "Tell Ur Girlfriend" come together?
I make songs based on real-life experiences. I walked in the studio with [co-writer/producer] Johnny Goldstein and [co-writer] Ink, sat there for two hours before we made the song, and I broke down the situation. I came up with some things that I liked, and then [Ink] helped me piece together the hook. I freestyled verses; I just said how I felt. I actually had to rerecord it because I felt like some things needed to be changed to make it a little more truthful. It was probably a two-week process to get this song where I really wanted it to be.

The song is No. 1 on the TikTok Billboard Top 50 chart. What is your relationship like with the internet?
It makes everything easier to market yourself if you use it the right way. I control my social media narrative, and nobody could convince me otherwise. When I first started, it was more stressful because I wasn't used to all the attention and people commenting on my everyday life — how I look, how I dress, what I do. Then again, I'm from [Philadelphia], so people judge you by everything. I learned that [by] being yourself unapologetically, you're going to be more happy than trying to please a bunch of people on the internet who don't really know you anyway.

What gives you the fearlessness to speak your truth in your music?
I'll be mad and be like, "Oh, my God. I don't want to do this no more," but in reality, I wouldn't be happy doing anything else. When I cry, I can cry in the booth and cry on the song. When I'm in love, I can make a love song so beautiful that every time I listen, I feel the embodiment of that emotion. I think that's powerful. My relationship with music is intricate and it's messy, but it's my first love. Music is always going to be that.

—KYLE DENIS

HOT 100 FIRST-TIMERS

Artists who have recently made their initial appearances on the chart

ARTIST	SONG	DEBUT POSITION	DEBUT DATE
$uicideboy$	"Us Vs. Them"	96	May 4
Tommy Richman	"Million Dollar Baby"	2	May 11
Mark Ambor	"Belong Together"	87	May 11

AIRPLAY, SALES AND STREAMING DATA COMPILED BY LUMINATE

BILLBOARD HOT 100: THE WEEK'S MOST POPULAR CURRENT SONGS ACROSS ALL GENRES, RANKED BY STREAMING ACTIVITY DATA BY ONLINE MUSIC SOURCES TRACKED BY LUMINATE, RADIO AIRPLAY AUDIENCE IMPRESSIONS AS MEASURED BY LUMINATE AND SALES DATA AS COMPILED BY LUMINATE. SEE CHARTS LEGEND ON BILLBOARD.COM FOR COMPLETE RULES AND EXPLANATIONS. © 2024 BILLBOARD MEDIA LLC AND LUMINATE INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

SETH ENGLAND

Congratulations on being named

BILLBOARD COUNTRY EXECUTIVE OF THE YEAR

We are excited to go full throttle with
our partnership into the future.

Mercury Records REPUBLIC

BILLBOARD 200

2

Morgan Wallen
One Thing at a Time

Following Wallen's festival-closing headlining spot at Stagecoach on April 28, his three full-length studio sets all jump up the list, with *Dangerous: The Double Album* (No. 6) ascending to its highest rank in nearly a year.

10

PartyNextDoor
PartyNextDoor 4 (P4)

The artist lands his third top 10-charting set on the Billboard 200 (37,000 equivalent album units earned in the United States in the week ending May 2, according to Luminate) and fifth on Top R&B Albums (No. 2).

174

Def Leppard
Pyromania

The album returns to the chart for the first time in over six years thanks to a 40th-anniversary deluxe reissue. It peaked at No. 2 in 1983 for two weeks, behind Michael Jackson's *Thriller*.

18

Laufey
Bewitched

Laufey's *Bewitched* reenters the Billboard 200 at No. 18, surpassing its previous high of No. 23 when it debuted on the ranking dated Sept. 23, 2023. It returns to the list following a deluxe reissue on April 26, dubbed *Bewitched: The Goddess Edition*, with four bonus tracks. *The Goddess Edition* was released on six vinyl variants and as a CD, cassette, digital download and streaming album. All told, the set earned 28,000 equivalent album units in the United States in the week ending May 2 (up 275%), with 15,000 of that sum in traditional album sales (up 978%). Both are new single-week highs for the singer-songwriter.

Also reaching a new peak on the Billboard 200 is Teddy Swims' *I've Tried Everything but Therapy*, which climbs 36-21 with 25,000 units (his best week yet, up 26%). The full-length relaunched April 26 with four additional songs as a download and streaming album. —KEITH CAULFIELD

Billboard 200

2 WKS. AGO	LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	Artist / IMPRINT/DISTRIBUTING LABEL	Title	PEAK POS.	WKS. ON CHART
-	1	1	#1 for 2 WEEKS **Taylor Swift** REPUBLIC	The Tortured Poets Department	1	2
4	4	2	GG **Morgan Wallen** BIG LOUD/MERCURY/REPUBLIC	One Thing At A Time	1	61
3	2	3	**Future & Metro Boomin** BOOMINATI/FREEBANDZ/REPUBLIC/EPIC	We Don't Trust You	1	6
2	3	4	**Beyonce** PARKWOOD/COLUMBIA	Cowboy Carter	1	5
5	7	5	**Noah Kahan** MERCURY/REPUBLIC	Stick Season	2	75
9	11	6	**Morgan Wallen** BIG LOUD/REPUBLIC	Dangerous: The Double Album	1	173
7	8	7	**Benson Boone** NIGHT STREET/WARNER	Fireworks & Rollerblades	6	4
1	6	8	**Future & Metro Boomin** BOOMINATI/FREEBANDZ/REPUBLIC/EPIC	We Still Don't Trust You	1	3
8	9	9	**SZA** TOP DAWG/RCA	SOS	1	73
HOT SHOT DEBUT		10	**PARTYNEXTDOOR** OVO SOUND/SANTA ANNA	PARTYNEXTDOOR 4 (P4)	10	1
13	13	11	**Zach Bryan** BELTING BRONCO/WARNER	Zach Bryan	1	36
10	12	12	**Ariana Grande** REPUBLIC	Eternal Sunshine	1	8
22	18	13	**Post Malone** MERCURY/REPUBLIC	The Diamond Collection	13	24
11	10	14	**Taylor Swift** REPUBLIC	Lover	1	245
12	16	15	**Olivia Rodrigo** GEFFEN/ICLG	Guts	1	34
19	19	16	**Zach Bryan** BELTING BRONCO/WARNER	American Heartbreak	5	102
16	17	17	**Drake** OVO SOUND/REPUBLIC	For All The Dogs	1	30
RE-ENTRY		18	**Laufey** LAUFEY/AWAL	Bewitched	18	10
15	14	19	**Taylor Swift** REPUBLIC	1989 (Taylor's Version)	1	27
21	21	20	**Travis Scott** CACTUS JACK/EPIC	Utopia	1	40

SALES AND STREAMING DATA COMPILED BY LUMINATE. BILLBOARD 200: THE WEEK'S MOST POPULAR ALBUMS, BASED ON MULTIMETRIC CONSUMPTION, BLENDING TRADITIONAL ALBUM SALES, STREAMING-EQUIVALENT ALBUMS AND TRACK-EQUIVALENT ALBUMS, AS COMPILED BY LUMINATE. SEE CHARTS LEGEND ON BILLBOARD.COM FOR COMPLETE RULES AND EXPLANATIONS. © 2024 BILLBOARD MEDIA LLC AND LUMINATE INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

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GLOBAL 200

2

"Espresso"
Sabrina Carpenter

SABRINA CARPENTER'S "Espresso" percolates from No. 17 to No. 2 on the Billboard Global 200 two weeks after it entered at No. 10, becoming her first hit in the chart's top tier. The song drew 85.8 million streams (up 35%) and sold 6,000 (up 18%) worldwide April 26-May 2, according to Luminate. It also becomes the first top five hit on the Billboard Hot 100 for the singer-songwriter-actress.

Shaboozey's "A Bar Song (Tipsy)" flies 33-6 on the Global 200 with 56.4 million streams (up 68%) and 25,000 sold (up 48%) worldwide, marking his first top 10. The track interpolates J-Kwon's "Tipsy," which crowned Hot Rap Songs for five weeks in 2004. Shaboozey concurrently scores his first top 10 on the Hot 100 with his single and tops Hot Country Songs for a second week.

Elsewhere on the Global 200, The Outfield's "Your Love" rises 189-185. Originally a No. 6-peaking Hot 100 hit in 1986, the song gained by 2% to 13.6 million streams worldwide in the week ending May 2. (At the beginning of February, it was drawing over 8 million weekly streams globally.) Meanwhile, a new version debuted on the May 4-dated Hot Dance/Electronic Songs chart: "Your Love (Remix)" by The Outfield and Diplo. The collaboration marked The Outfield's first newly released entry on a ranking since 1992.

Daya's "Hide Away" is also resurging, entering the Global 200 at No. 198. The song, which climbed to No. 23 on the Hot 100 in 2016, soared by 107% to 11.9 million worldwide streams in the tracking week, powered by activity on TikTok. It pushed 21-17 on the May 4-dated TikTok Billboard Top 50 chart.

—GARY TRUST

Global 200

2 WKS. AGO	LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	Title	Artist	PEAK POS.	WKS. ON CHART
-	1	1	#1 for 2 WEEKS **Fortnight**	Taylor Swift Featuring Post Malone	1	2
10	17	2	**Espresso**	Sabrina Carpenter	2	3
2	10	3	**I Like The Way You Kiss Me**	Artemas	2	6
3	12	4	**Beautiful Things**	Benson Boone	1	15
1	13	5	**Too Sweet**	Hozier	1	6
45	33	6	GG **A Bar Song (Tipsy)**	Shaboozey	6	3
4	14	7	**Gata Only**	FloyyMenor X Cris Mj	4	12
-	5	8	**I Can Do It With A Broken Heart**	Taylor Swift	5	2
-	2	9	**Down Bad**	Taylor Swift	2	2
HOT SHOT DEBUT		10	**Million Dollar Baby**	Tommy Richman	10	1
5	23	11	**Lose Control**	Teddy Swims	4	33
6	21	12	**Magnetic**	ILLIT	6	6
8	25	13	**We Can't Be Friends (Wait For Your Love)**	Ariana Grande	1	8
-	4	14	**So Long, London**	Taylor Swift	4	2
-	6	15	**My Boy Only Breaks His Favorite Toys**	Taylor Swift	6	2
7	27	16	**Like That**	Future, Metro Boomin & Kendrick Lamar	1	6
-	9	17	**Who's Afraid Of Little Old Me?**	Taylor Swift	9	2
NEW		18	**Euphoria**	Kendrick Lamar	18	1
-	3	19	**The Tortured Poets Department**	Taylor Swift	3	2
9	31	20	**End Of Beginning**	Djo	3	11

STREAMING AND SALES DATA COMPILED BY LUMINATE

BILLBOARD GLOBAL 200: THE WEEK'S MOST POPULAR SONGS BASED ON STREAMING AND SALES ACTIVITY FROM OVER 200 TERRITORIES AROUND THE WORLD — INCLUDING THE UNITED STATES — AS TRACKED BY LUMINATE. THE RANKING IS BASED ON A WEIGHTED FORMULA INCORPORATING OFFICIAL-ONLY STREAMS ON BOTH SUBSCRIPTION AND AD-SUPPORTED TIERS OF LEADING AUDIO AND VIDEO MUSIC SERVICES, PLUS DOWNLOAD SALES FROM TOP MUSIC RETAILERS ACROSS THE GLOBE. SEE CHARTS LEGEND ON BILLBOARD.COM FOR COMPLETE RULES AND EXPLANATIONS. © 2024 BILLBOARD MEDIA LLC AND LUMINATE INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

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Golden Nugget Casino, Lake Charles

Casino of the Year, Theatre

Resorts World Theatre at Resorts World Las Vegas

Arena of the Year

T-Mobile Center

Club of the Year

Billy Bob's Texas

and

Mission Ballroom

Fair/Rodeo of the Year

Cheyenne Frontier Days

Outdoor Venue of the Year

Red Rocks Amphitheatre

and

Santa Barbara Bowl

Theater of the Year

Austin City Limits Live at the Moody Theater

and

Ryman Auditorium

From Your Friends at

axs

ARTIST 100

5

KENDRICK LAMAR

WEEKS ON CHART

435

Lamar's 30-5 leap on the Billboard Artist 100 is sparked by "Euphoria," a dis track in his ongoing feud with Drake. Released April 30, the single drew 28.9 million official U.S. streams in the week ending May 2, according to Luminate, and debuts at No. 2 on Hot Rap Songs and No. 3 on Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs. —TREVOR ANDERSON

NO. **36**

Boy Begets No. 1 For Hemmings

Luke Hemmings leads the Emerging Artists chart for the first time, reentering at No. 1 thanks to his new project, *Boy*. The seven-track set, released April 26, starts at No. 5 on Top Album Sales with 10,000 sold. It's his second solo entry on the chart after his debut full-length, *When Facing the Things We Turn Away From*, hit No. 9 in August 2021. Hemmings is the lead singer/rhythm guitarist of Australian group 5 Seconds of Summer. The act charted three No. 1 albums on the Billboard 200 in 2014-18. —XANDER ZELLNER

NO. **41**

ILLIT Attracts Followers

ILLIT's first EP, *Super Real Me*, soars in at No. 2 on the World Albums chart, as well as No. 9 on Top Album Sales with 8,000 copies sold. Powering the set is the South Korean quintet's breakthrough single, "Magnetic," which has become its first Billboard Hot 100 hit and has reached the top 10 of the Billboard Global 200 and Billboard Global Excl. U.S. charts. The track has led Hong Kong Songs, Malaysia Songs, Singapore Songs, South Korea Songs and Taiwan Songs. ILLIT formed in 2023 through the Korean JTBC reality show *R U Next?* —GARY TRUST

Artist 100

2 WKS. AGO	LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	Artist	IMPRINT/LABEL	PEAK POS.	WKS. ON CHART
1	1	1	#1 for 107 WEEKS **Taylor Swift**	REPUBLIC	1	510
3	2	2	**Morgan Wallen**	BIG LOUD/MERCURY/REPUBLIC	1	269
7	4	3	**SZA**	TOP DAWG/RCA	1	244
8	5	4	**Luke Combs**	RIVER HOUSE/COLUMBIA NASHVILLE/SMN	1	374
26	30	5	**Kendrick Lamar**	PGLANG/TOP DAWG/AFTERMATH/INTERSCOPE/ICLG	1	435
10	9	6	**Zach Bryan**	BELTING BRONCO/WARNER	1	103
18	3	7	**Drake**	OVO SOUND/REPUBLIC	1	514
9	6	8	**Benson Boone**	NIGHT STREET/WARNER	6	15
38	24	9	**Shaboozey**	AMERICAN DOGWOOD/EMPIRE	9	3
22	10	10	**Sabrina Carpenter**	ISLAND/REPUBLIC	10	22
2	8	11	**Beyonce**	PARKWOOD/COLUMBIA	1	286
11	18	12	**Noah Kahan**	MERCURY/REPUBLIC	6	47
16	11	13	**Teddy Swims**	SWIMS INT./WARNER	7	34
15	12	14	**Hozier**	RUBYWORKS/COLUMBIA	3	119
RE-ENTRY		15	**Grateful Dead**	GRATEFUL DEAD/RHINO	3	48
14	13	16	**Jelly Roll**	BAILEE & BUDDY/BROKEN BOW/BMG/BBMG	4	94
4	7	17	**Future**	FREEBANDZ/EPIC	1	337
13	20	18	**Ariana Grande**	REPUBLIC	1	439
19	14	19	**Dua Lipa**	WARNER	1	313
RE-ENTRY		20	**Laufey**	LAUFEY/AWAL	20	3

LAMAR: ARTURO HOLMES/MG23/GETTY IMAGES. HEMMINGS: SAM NIXON. ILLIT: HYBE.

AIRPLAY, SALES AND STREAMING DATA COMPILED BY LUMINATE

BILLBOARD ARTIST 100: THE WEEK'S MOST POPULAR ARTISTS ACROSS ALL GENRES, RANKED BY ALBUM AND TRACK SALES AS MEASURED BY LUMINATE, RADIO AIRPLAY AUDIENCE IMPRESSIONS AS MEASURED BY LUMINATE, STREAMING ACTIVITY DATA FROM ONLINE MUSIC SOURCES TRACKED BY LUMINATE. SEE CHARTS LEGEND ON BILLBOARD.COM FOR COMPLETE RULES AND EXPLANATIONS. © 2024 BILLBOARD MEDIA LLC AND LUMINATE INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

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INTRODUCING
COUNTRY'S RISING SOUND

NO. 1

Tommy Richman Banks First No. 1

Richman storms onto the Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs chart at the peak with "Million Dollar Baby." The single, which launches at No. 2 on the Billboard Hot 100, tallied 38 million official U.S. streams in the week ending May 2, according to Luminate, and is the week's most streamed song. The track built its buzz on TikTok, where preview snippets created anticipation for its full release. In addition to its stream sum, "Million Dollar Baby" registered 300,000 audience impressions and sold 4,000 downloads in the same tracking period.

The single gives Virginia native Richman his first No. 1 in just his second visit to Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs and his first as a lead artist. He previously reached No. 33 in November with a supporting role on Brent Faiyaz's "Upset" alongside Felix! Thanks to the fervor for "Million Dollar Baby," "Upset" returns to the list at No. 40, spurred by 4.2 million streams, up 94% from the prior week. —TREVOR ANDERSON

Hot R&B/Hip-Hop Songs

Last Week	This Week	Title / Imprint/Promotion Label	Artist	Wks. on Chart
HOT SHOT DEBUT	1	#1 for 1 WEEK **Million Dollar Baby** ISO SUPREMACY/PULSE RECORDS	Tommy Richman	1
1	2	**Like That** BOOMINATI/FREEBANDZ/REPUBLIC/EPIC	Future, Metro Boomin & Kendrick Lamar	6
NEW	3	**Euphoria** PGLANG/INTERSCOPE/ICLG	Kendrick Lamar	1
4	4	**Saturn** TOP DAWG/RCA	SZA	10
3	5	**Lovin On Me** GENERATION NOW/ATLANTIC	Jack Harlow	25
2	6	**Push Ups** OVO SOUND/REPUBLIC	Drake	2
5	7	**Type Shit** BOOMINATI/FREEBANDZ/REPUBLIC/EPIC	Future, Metro Boomin, Travis Scott & Playboi Carti	6
8	8	**Get It Sexyy** OPEN SHIFT/GAMMA.	Sexyy Red	7
6	9	**Agora Hills** KEMOSABE/RCA	Doja Cat	32
7	10	SAL **Wanna Be** CMG/INTERSCOPE/ICLG	GloRilla & Megan Thee Stallion	4

NO. 1

More Leading Music For Winans

CeCe Winans earns her 10th No. 1 on Top Gospel Albums and her second on Top Christian Albums with the new live collection *More Than This*. The set earned 8,000 equivalent album units, including 5,000 in album sales, the week of April 26-May 2, according to Luminate. It was recorded at Nashville's Rocketown in August 2023.

Notably, the Detroit native has had at least one No. 1 on Top Gospel Albums in five consecutive decades, dating to her first (with brother Bebe Winans) in 1989.

Concurrently, the new set's "That's My King" becomes Winans' third No. 1 on the Hot Gospel Songs chart and her third top 10 on Hot Christian Songs (18-7).

"I'm a firm believer that when you keep God at the center of everything, he will do the rest," Winans says. "*More Than This* is a joyful collection of songs that focus on his faithfulness and greatness." —JIM ASKER

Top Gospel Albums

Last Week	This Week	Artist / Imprint/Distributing Label	Title	Wks. on Chart
NEW	1	#1 for 1 WEEK **CeCe Winans** PURESPRINGS GOSPEL/FAIR TRADE	More Than This	1
1	2	**Kanye West** G.O.O.D./DEF JAM	Donda	140
2	3	**Maverick City Music, Chandler Moore & Naomi Raine** TRIBL	The Maverick Way Complete: Complete Vol 02	27
3	4	**CeCe Winans** PURESPRINGS GOSPEL/FAIR TRADE	Believe For It: A Live Worship Experience	164
4	5	**Elevation Worship & Maverick City Music** ELEVATION WORSHIP/PLG	Old Church Basement	157
6	6	**Kanye West** G.O.O.D./DEF JAM	Jesus Is King (Soundtrack)	236
7	7	**Marvin Sapp** VERITY/LEGACY	Playlist: The Very Best Of Marvin Sapp	456
9	8	**Maverick City Music & UPPERROOM** MAVERICK CITY MUSIC	Move Your Heart.	170
8	9	**Koryn Hawthorne** RCA INSPIRATION/PLG	On God...	12
11	10	**Tasha Cobbs Leonard** MOTOWN GOSPEL/CAPITOL CMG	Heart. Passion. Pursuit	349

RICHMAN: JOSH BELVEDERE. WINANS: HANNAH CORWIN.

AIRPLAY, SALES AND STREAMING DATA COMPILED BY LUMINATE

HOT R&B/HIP-HOP SONGS: THE WEEK'S MOST POPULAR CURRENT R&B/HIP-HOP SONGS ACROSS ALL GENRES, RANKED BY STREAMING ACTIVITY DATA BY ONLINE MUSIC SOURCES TRACKED BY LUMINATE, RADIO AIRPLAY AUDIENCE IMPRESSIONS AS MEASURED BY MEDIABASE AND PROVIDED BY LUMINATE AND SALES DATA AS COMPILED BY LUMINATE. TOP GOSPEL ALBUMS: THE WEEK'S MOST POPULAR GOSPEL ALBUMS. BASED ON MULTIMETRIC CONSUMPTION, BLENDING TRADITIONAL ALBUM SALES, STREAM-EQUIVALENT ALBUMS AND TRACK-EQUIVALENT ALBUMS, AS COMPILED BY LUMINATE. SEE CHARTS LEGEND ON BILLBOARD.COM FOR COMPLETE RULES AND EXPLANATIONS. © 2024 BILLBOARD MEDIA LLC AND LUMINATE INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

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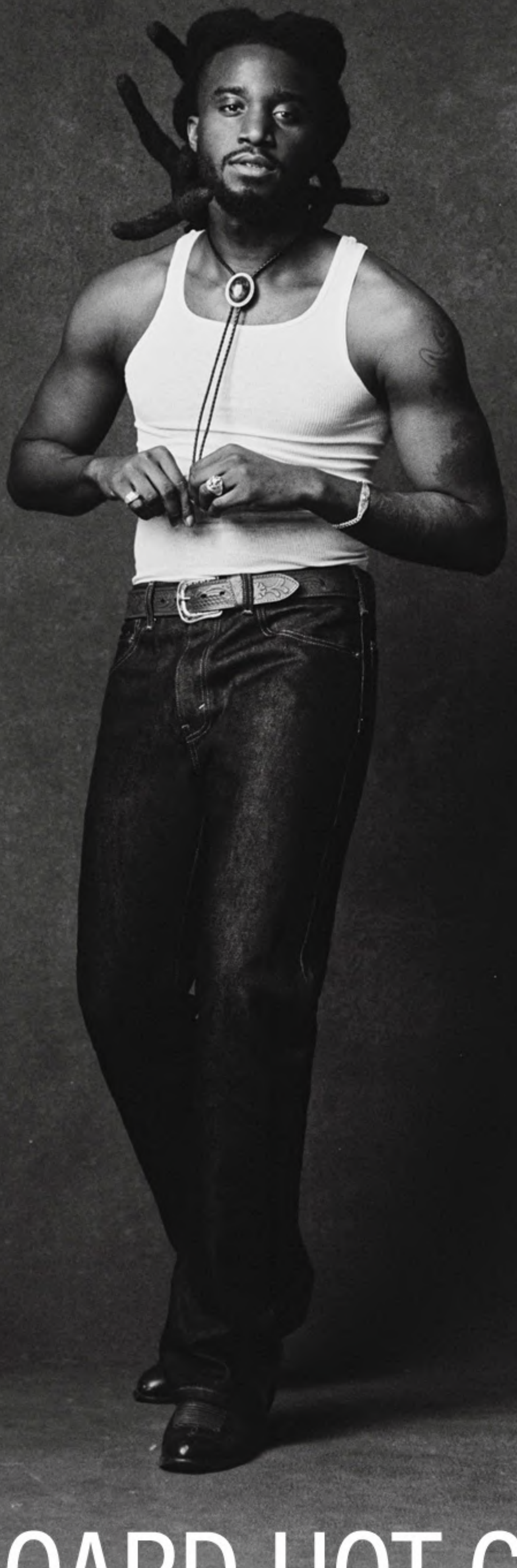

#1 BILLBOARD HOT COUNTRY

100M+ STREAMS

EMPIRE

NO. 2

Towers Turns In Top Debuts

Myke Towers scores his highest-charting song yet on Hot Latin Songs as "Adivino," with Bad Bunny, debuts at No. 2. It's the 52nd entry on the chart for Towers and the 11th to reach the top 10. For Bad Bunny, the track marks his record-extending 75th top 10 out of 170 total chart hits (also the most among all artists).

Towers previously topped out at No. 3 with both "La Jeepeta" (with Nio García, Anuel AA, Brray and Juanka) and "Caramelo" (with Ozuna and Karol G).

On the all-genre Billboard Hot 100, "Adivino" ("Predict") opens at No. 63, Towers' highest debut. The track's arrival on the chart is almost entirely driven by streaming activity. It also starts at No. 2 on Latin Streaming Songs with 9.9 million official streams registered in the United States in the week ending May 2, according to Luminate. —PAMELA BUSTIOS

Hot Latin Songs

LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	Title / IMPRINT/PROMOTION LABEL	Artist	WKS. ON CHART
1	1	#1 for 4 WEEKS **Gata Only** FLOYYMENOR/UNITEDMASTERS	FloyyMenor X Cris Mj	10
HOT SHOT DEBUT	2	**Adivino** ONE WORLD INTERNATIONAL/WARNER LATINA	Myke Towers & Bad Bunny	1
2	3	**La Diabla** INTERSCOPE/ICLG	Xavi	22
3	4	**Tu Name** STREET MOB/RANCHO HUMILDE/SONY MUSIC LATIN	Fuerza Regida	12
4	5	**Corazon de Piedra** INTERSCOPE/ICLG	Xavi	6
5	6	SAL **Perro Negro** RIMAS	Bad Bunny & Feid	29
8	7	**Luna** UNIVERSAL MUSIC LATINO/UMLE	Feid & ATL Jacob	21
13	8	STM **Santa** HEAD CONCUSSION/SONY MUSIC LATIN	Rvssian, Rauw Alejandro & Ayra Starr	3
6	9	**Qlona** BICHOTA/INTERSCOPE/ICLG	Karol G & Peso Pluma	38
9	10	**Si No Quieres No** KARTEL MUSIC	Luis R Conriquez x Neton Vega	7

NO. 4

'Unstoppable' After 100 Weeks

Given its title, Sia's "Unstoppable" aptly becomes the first song in over 20 years to spend 100 weeks on the Adult Contemporary chart. The track, at No. 4, notched 12 weeks at No. 1 nonconsecutively between November 2022 and March 2023.

The song is the fourth to log at least 100 weeks on Adult Contemporary during the list's history, which dates to July 1961, joining Savage Garden's "I Knew I Loved You" (124 weeks in 1999-2002) and "Truly Madly Deeply" (123, 1998-2000) and LeAnn Rimes' "I Need You" (104, 2000-02). (Coincidentally, Sia and Savage Garden are both from Australia.)

"Unstoppable" was originally released on Sia's 2016 studio album, *This Is Acting*. It was used in promos for Major League Baseball that postseason and in a Lancôme Idôle commercial starring Zendaya in 2019. The song subsequently became prominent on TikTok and soundtracked a Samsung Galaxy ad. Proper radio promotion for it began in early 2022. —GARY TRUST

Adult Contemporary

LAST WEEK	THIS WEEK	Title / IMPRINT/PROMOTION LABEL	Artist	WKS. ON CHART
1	1	#1 for 46 WEEKS **Flowers** SMILEY MILEY/COLUMBIA	Miley Cyrus	68
2	2	**Cruel Summer** REPUBLIC	Taylor Swift	42
3	3	**Fast Car** RIVER HOUSE/COLUMBIA NASHVILLE/COLUMBIA	Luke Combs	53
4	4	**Unstoppable** MONKEY PUZZLE/RCA/LEGACY/CRUSH MUSIC	Sia	100
5	5	**Anti-Hero** REPUBLIC	Taylor Swift	81
6	6	**Dance The Night** MATTEL/WATERTOWER/ATLANTIC/WARNER	Dua Lipa	47
7	7	**Calm Down** JONZING WORLD/MAVIN/SMG MUSIC/INTERSCOPE/VIRGIN/ICLG	Rema & Selena Gomez	45
8	8	**Turn The Lights Back On** COLUMBIA	Billy Joel	14
9	9	**I'm Good (Blue)** WHAT A DJ/WARNER	David Guetta & Bebe Rexha	75
10	10	**Eyes Closed** ATLANTIC	Ed Sheeran	58

TOWERS: MARILYN TANG. SIA: MICAIAH CARTER.

AIRPLAY, SALES AND STREAMING DATA COMPILED BY LUMINATE

HOT LATIN SONGS: THE WEEK'S MOST POPULAR CURRENT LATIN SONGS ACROSS ALL GENRES, RANKED BY STREAMING ACTIVITY DATA BY ONLINE MUSIC SOURCES TRACKED BY LUMINATE, RADIO AIRPLAY AUDIENCE IMPRESSIONS AS MEASURED BY MEDIABASE AND PROVIDED BY LUMINATE AND SALES DATA AS COMPILED BY LUMINATE. ADULT CONTEMPORARY: THE WEEK'S MOST POPULAR SONGS RANKED BY ADULT CONTEMPORARY RADIO AIRPLAY DETECTIONS, AS MEASURED BY MEDIABASE AND PROVIDED BY LUMINATE. STATIONS ARE ELECTRONICALLY MONITORED 24 HOURS A DAY, SEVEN DAYS A WEEK. SEE CHARTS LEGEND ON BILLBOARD.COM FOR COMPLETE RULES AND EXPLANATIONS. © 2024 BILLBOARD MEDIA LLC AND LUMINATE INC. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.

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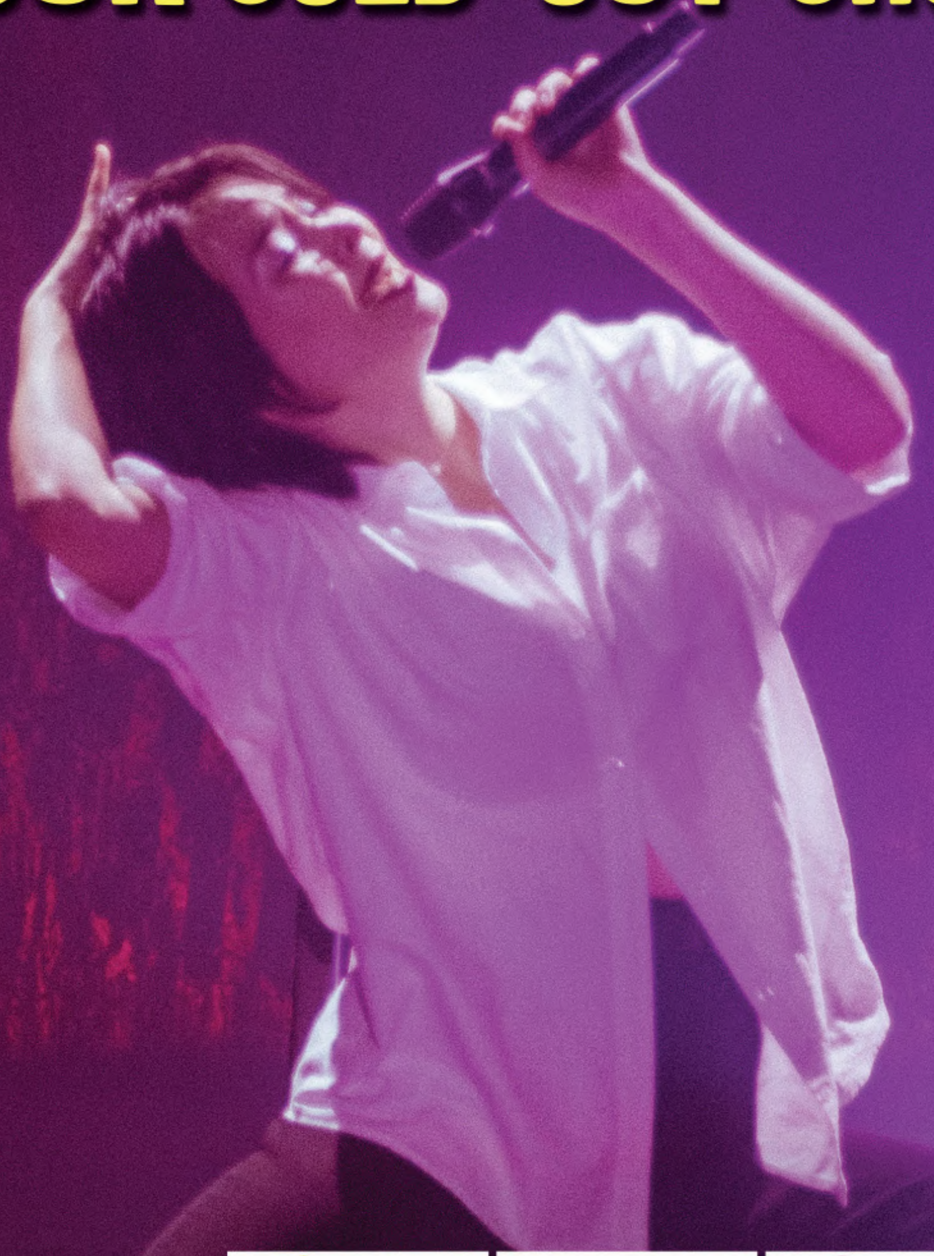

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market

PG. 19 PORTIA SABIN PREVIEWS MUSIC BIZ
PG. 20 THE ADULT R&B FORMAT GETS A REFRESH
PG. 22 TUNJI BALOGUN LAYS OUT DEF JAM'S FUTURE

MUSIC AND MONEY

Sony Extends Its Sweep

Warner Chappell holds second place on both music publisher rankings for a second consecutive quarter

BY ED CHRISTMAN

ILLUSTRATION BY ISRAEL VARGAS

Clockwise: Harlow, Tyla, Teddy Swims, Doja Cat and Swift.

SONY MUSIC PUBLISHING swept *Billboard*'s Publishers Quarterly rankings for the first three months of 2024 — its fifth consecutive quarter atop the Top Radio Airplay and Hot 100 Songs lists.

Sony also had a piece of the song that ruled both charts — Jack Harlow's "Lovin on Me." The other top 10 publishers with a stake in the song: Universal Music Publishing Group (UMPG), Warner Chappell Music and Kobalt.

The first quarter's top songwriter on the Hot 100 Songs ranking was Noah Kahan. He landed at the peak due to two songs, including the No. 10 track on the chart, "Stick Season." Not surprisingly, on Top Radio Airplay, Taylor Swift was the No. 1 songwriter thanks to the success of three songs on that list, including "Is It Over Now (Taylor's Version) (From the Vault)" at No. 5.

Returning to Sony, the publisher finished the quarter with a 29.19% slice of market share on the strength of shares in 66 songs — an improvement over the 64 songs and 27.69% the company claimed in the prior quarter. For the first quarter's Hot 100 Songs chart, Sony ended up with a 28.60% share with 58 songs — again, an improvement over the prior quarter's 27.14% share, but one song less than the 59 tracks it snared in that quarter.

Sony's showing marks the 12th quarter in a row that it ranked No. 1 among Top Radio Airplay publishers. Remarkably, it has held the top spot for 25 of the last 26 quarters. On the Hot 100 Songs chart, Sony ranked No. 1 for the fifth consecutive quarter.

Meanwhile, Warner Chappell Music continued its surge, finishing in second place for a second consecutive quarter on both publisher rankings. The publisher increased its quarter-to-quarter market share in both categories — from 19.12% to 21.93% on Top Radio Airplay and 20.65% to 22.05% on Hot 100 Songs. Warner Chappell's Top Radio Airplay song count also grew from 54 to 63 quarter to quarter, and its Hot 100 song count ballooned from 44 to 58. It was also No. 1 on the Country Airplay publisher rankings.

UMPG came in third on both charts, posting a stronger showing on the Hot 100 Songs ranking, with a 17.42% share and 43 songs. That's up from the prior quarter's 15.78% and 41 songs. Its top track on both charts was Harlow's "Lovin on Me." On Top Radio Airplay, UMPG posted a 14.65% share with a stake in 44 songs, down from the prior quarter's 18.47% and 48 songs.

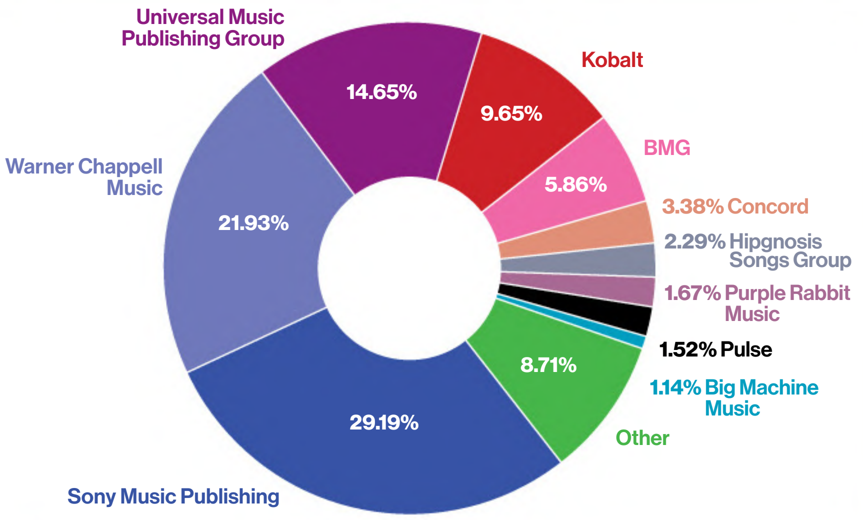
Kobalt and BMG, respectively, came in at No. 4 and No. 5, their usual spots on both publisher rankings. Kobalt upped its game in the Top Radio Airplay category, amassing a 9.65% share of the market with stakes in 31 songs — an improvement over the fourth quarter, when it had an 8.81% share and 30 songs. Kobalt performed even better on the Hot 100 Songs chart with a 10.19% market share, but that was still down from the 10.83% share it had in the fourth quarter.

BMG's market share declined on both charts. Its Top Radio Airplay share fell from 6.77% to 5.86% quarter to quarter and from 5.95% to 5.47% on Hot 100 Songs. ◼

Universal Music Group and TikTok announced a new licensing deal, ending a three-month standoff.

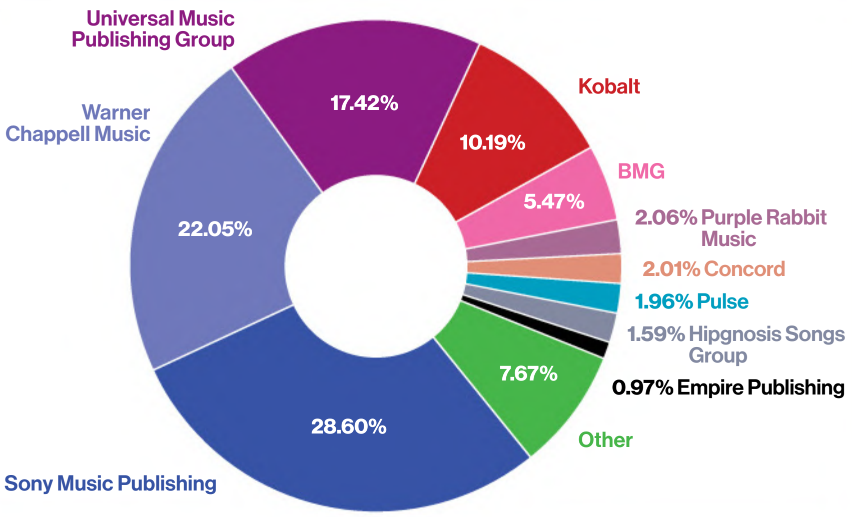
The Hipgnosis Songs Fund board backed Blackstone's $1.6 billion acquisition bid, potentially ending a bidding war with Concord.

Top Radio Airplay: Publishers*



Rank	Title	Artist	Imprint/Promotion Label
1	"Lovin on Me"	Jack Harlow	Generation Now/Atlantic
2	"Agora Hills"	Doja Cat	Kemosabe/RCA
3	"Water"	Tyla	FAX Records/Epic
4	"Greedy"	Tate McRae	RCA
5	"Is It Over Now? (Taylor's Version) (From the Vault)"	Taylor Swift	Republic
6	"Cruel Summer"	Taylor Swift	Republic
7	"Paint the Town Red"	Doja Cat	Kemosabe/RCA
8	"Lose Control"	Teddy Swims	SWIMS Int./Warner
9	"Houdini"	Dua Lipa	Warner
10	"Calm Down"	Rema & Selena Gomez	Jonzing World/Mavin/SMG Music/Interscope/Virgin/ICLG

Hot 100 Songs: Publishers*



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5	"I Remember Everything"	Zach Bryan featuring Kacey Musgraves	Interscope/Belting Bronco/Warner/MCA Nashville/WAR
6	"Snooze"	SZA	Top Dawg/RCA
7	"Beautiful Things"	Benson Boone	Night Street/Warner
8	"Agora Hills"	Doja Cat	Kemosabe/RCA
9	"Water"	Tyla	FAX Records/Epic
10	"Stick Season"	Noah Kahan	Mercury/Republic

For the top 10 publishers of Top Radio Airplay, percentage calculations were based upon the overall top 100 detecting songs from 3,017 U.S. radio stations electronically monitored by Luminate 24 hours a day, seven days a week during the period of Dec. 29, 2023, to March 28, 2024; 429 stations were monitored for Country Airplay. For the top 10 publishers of Hot 100 Songs, percentage calculations were based upon the top 100 songs as ranked by Billboard Hot 100 points calculated from digital sales, streaming and Luminate-tracked radio airplay detections during the period of Dec. 29, 2023, to March 28, 2024, reflecting the issue dates of Jan. 13, 2024, to April 6, 2024. Publisher information for musical works on both charts has been identified by the Harry Fox Agency. A "publisher" is defined as an administrator, copyright owner and/or controlling party. Due to rounding, total market share may not add up to 100.

She's All Biz-ness

Portia Sabin pulls back the curtain on the 2024 Music Business Association's annual conference

MUSIC BUSINESS Association president Portia Sabin's career has reached most of the corners of the music industry, including drumming in all-female punk power-pop band The Hissyfits in the late 1990s.

She founded Shotclock Management in the early 2000s and, beginning in 2006, ran the indie label Kill Rock Stars for 13 years. (She is married to its founder, Slim Moon.) During that time, she served on the boards of directors for both U.S. label trade associations — the American Association of Independent Music and the RIAA — and the Recording Academy's Pacific Northwest chapter. "I made a lot of connections across the industry through them and got a good sense of what part trade associations play in the ecosystem, as well as ideas about board management," she says.

That experience has served Sabin well since she took over the Music Business Association, known colloquially as Music Biz, in 2019. Formerly called the National Association of Recording Merchandisers, the organization initially catered to retailers, wholesalers and labels' sales divisions. But as the industry reinvented itself around streaming, Music Biz took on a much broader mandate. It serves as a forum where all sectors of the industry can unite to discuss mutual problems and explore new opportunities.

Ahead of Music Biz's annual conference, which will take place May 13-16 in Nashville, Sabin spoke to *Billboard* about what attendees can expect.

How does this year's convention compare with 2023?

We had about 2,100 people last year, and we are now more than 50% further along in terms of registrations than last year at this point. I'm anticipating about 2,300. Our board wanted us to grow international attendance, so we have folks from over 30 countries.

Sabin

How many members does Music Biz have?

We currently have 369 member companies. We've done away with individual and student memberships, but we still have some individual members who are grandfathered in because they are folks who are very critical to the music industry.

Artificial intelligence is a big topic this year. There are many panels on it.

Yes. We have TuneCore sponsoring our AI track, and [TuneCore CEO Andreea Gleeson] is going to be doing a keynote with Meng Ru Kuok, the CEO and founder of BandLab, which is on the cutting edge of everything that everybody wants to talk about. Our programming is crowdsourced and every year is different. Two years ago, we probably had 30 proposals on [non-fungible tokens]. This year, we had zero.

Any other programming you want to highlight?

I love that we got so many submissions on social impact, so we now have a whole track for this area. We have tracks on streaming, fraud and physical — 17 in all.

The conference goes to Atlanta next year.

Yes, it's going to be fun. We bought out the whole hotel. It'll just be the music folks. I hope it feels like going to a sleepaway summer camp. —E.C.

HARLOW: SWAN GALLET FOR WWD. TYLA: JOHN PHILLIPS/GETTY IMAGES. SWIMS: KRISTY SPAROW/GETTY IMAGES. DOJA CAT: MONICA SCHIPPER/WIREIMAGE. SWIFT: DON ARNOLD/TAS24/GETTY IMAGES. SABIN: GREGG DEGUIRE FOR BILLBOARD.

President Biden signed legislation that will force **TikTok** parent company **ByteDance** to sell the platform or face a ban.

Tupac Shakur's estate threatened to sue **Drake** over a dis track featuring a version of the late rapper's voice that had been generated by artificial intelligence.

Maeta onstage at the 2023 Soul Train Awards.

GENRE REPORT

ADULT R&B'S YOUTHFUL LOOK

Maeta, Muni Long, SZA and other artists in their 20s and 30s are reenergizing a format that was once the domain of legacy acts

BY ELIAS LEIGHT

WHEN SINGER-SONGWRITER Maeta hit No. 1 on *Billboard*'s Adult R&B Airplay radio chart in March with "Through the Night," a ballad modeled after seductive soul classics, she joined a growing group of artists who are challenging the definition of the format. Maeta is 23, far younger than the veterans who often reign supreme in the world of adult R&B — singers like 71-year-old Charlie Wilson, with nine No. 1s in the format, and Kem, 56, with eight.

The last week of March, just three staples of adult R&B — Wilson, Kenny Lattimore and Usher — were in the chart's top 10. They were vying for position with a younger generation represented by Victoria Monét, Muni Long, Tyla, Mahalia and SZA, who are in their 20s and 30s.

Historically, adult R&B is "where you would go to hear the music of legacy acts," Audacy format vp of mainstream hip-hop and R&B Mike Street says. "Then you would sprinkle in some newer acts that remind you of that. You're starting to have to put more of these newer, talented artists in the same space as the staples and let them slug it out."

The trend has its pluses and minuses. George "Geo" Cook, head of content and audience for Service Broadcasting Group, which includes KKDA (K104) and KRNB (Smooth R&B 105.7) Dallas-Fort Worth, is one of many in the industry who say, "It feels like the younger artists are reviving the format, which got a little stagnant just focusing on the staples." He adds. "We were too reliant on Uncle Charlie [Wilson]."

But as adult R&B's priorities shift, some artists may be left out in the cold. "I've been having this conversation with a lot of people over the past year," Radio One senior vp of programming Colby Tyner says. "It's tougher for some of the core adult R&B artists to break through today because they're competing with SZA and Muni Long."

At this point, "the chart is named wrong," says Michael Paran, founder of P Music Group, which manages Babyface, Wilson and Jodeci, among others. "Let's call it what it is: It's just R&B. The sad thing for me is the name [adult R&B] was probably the only thing that was giving any kind of leverage to my acts like Charlie and Babyface. There aren't a lot of acts doing it at that age and actually winning."

The adult R&B format has existed for more than three decades. Gray Communications president Tony Gray helped launch three such stations: WVAZ (V103) Chicago in 1988, WALR Atlanta in 1989 and WYLD New Orleans in 1990. At the time, a younger generation of listeners was becoming increasingly enamored with hip-hop or punchy fusions like New Jack Swing. The new format "would appeal more directly to the adult audience," Gray says.

Billboard launched its adult R&B chart in fall 1993. The ranking "is expected to benefit such artists as vocalist Phyllis Hyman and instrumentalists Grover Washington Jr. and Najee," *Billboard* reported at the time. "Record companies will now be able to build a story that can be used to gain acceptance at R&B mainstream stations, and hopefully for general-market [adult contemporary] stations," *Billboard*'s director of operations Terri Rossi said then.

> "It feels like the younger artists are reviving the format, which got a little stagnant just focusing on the staples."
> —GEORGE "GEO" COOK, SERVICE BROADCASTING GROUP

During the streaming era, the format has served as a haven for golden-voiced singers like Leela James and Ledisi. But it has not often functioned as a springboard for artists to gain acceptance at either mainstream R&B/hip-hop stations, which typically focus on hip-hop, or AC outlets, which tend to ignore R&B altogether. Adult R&B "used to be reserved for people who didn't have a shot on the mainstream side," says Rex Rideout, a longtime producer-songwriter who also helps manage Ledisi and James.

Due to the perception that adult R&B could be receptive but also potentially confining for those with mainstream ambitions, younger singers might be wary of it. "Artists were like, 'I don't want to be on the adult chart; that makes me old,' " Rideout says.

Major labels weren't always enthusiastic about the format either. "What I've been told by many people on the label side is they don't really like the R&B format because it didn't generate the revenue on streaming like the mainstream side does," Tyner says.

But as hip-hop became the dominant form of contemporary music, adult R&B's commitment to an underserved genre may have started to work in its favor. "When hip-hop became so prevalent, it pushed a lot of the R&B records to the side at the mainstream format," says Jeff Robinson, who co-manages Maeta along with Jeanine McLean. "A lot of great records were not getting airplay over there. A lot of the younger R&B artists needed a home." And some of them were welcomed at adult R&B, like Daniel Caesar and H.E.R.

It also helps that adult R&B stations are currently enjoying excellent ratings relative to their mainstream counterparts. Nielsen's top 10 stations — ranked according to the percentage of radio listeners tuned in to a particular station in a given market — included four adult R&B outlets in February. There was just a single mainstream R&B/hip-hop station in the top 50.

And some artists are finding they can use the format as a launching pad to reach a wider audience on the airwaves. Anchor Promotions president Lionel Ridenour used this strategy last year when promoting October London, whose "Back to Your Place" was a pitch-perfect homage to 1970s Marvin Gaye. (After summiting Adult R&B Airplay, Maeta is now testing her single at mainstream stations.)

In other words, now that more young artists are fighting for airplay at adult R&B stations, the format has regained some of the power that *Billboard*'s Rossi had hoped it would have when it launched.

Adult R&B "is now a place to incubate records; it has become more of an active participant in terms of breaking these acts," Ridenour says. "When the mainstream side is so hip-hop-heavy, it takes a while to get an R&B record going. Adult R&B airplay gives you an opportunity to get audience and seed the market for mainstream."

PARAS GRIFFIN/GETTY IMAGES

NMPA CONGRATULATES TOP Q1 PUBLISHERS

HOT 100

- SONY MUSIC PUBLISHING
- WARNER CHAPPELL
- UMPG
- KOBALT
- BMG
- PURPLE RABBIT MUSIC
- CONCORD
- PULSE MUSIC GROUP
- HIPGNOSIS SONGS GROUP
- EMPIRE PUBLISHING

RADIO AIRPLAY

- SONY MUSIC PUBLISHING
- WARNER CHAPPELL
- UMPG
- KOBALT
- BMG
- CONCORD
- HIPGNOSIS SONGS GROUP
- PURPLE RABBIT MUSIC
- PULSE MUSIC GROUP
- BIG MACHINE MUSIC

NMPA
IS ABOUT THE SONGS

Audacy reduced its workforce by "less than 2%" after filing for Chapter 11 bankruptcy restructuring in January.

ASM Global named **Lindsay Arell** as its first-ever chief sustainability officer.

From The Desk Of... Tunji Balogun

CHAIRMAN/CEO, DEF JAM RECORDINGS

BY DAN RYS

PHOTOGRAPHED BY DESEAN McCLINTON-HOLLAND

WHEN TUNJI BALOGUN took over Def Jam in January 2022 after a career working with stars such as Kendrick Lamar at Interscope; Khalid, Bryson Tiller, H.E.R. and Wizkid at RCA; and Normani at his own Keep Cool imprint, he says he found a label with "a lot of question marks. There was a lot of instability. It seemed like there were a lot of different perspectives."

In the five years prior to Balogun's tenure, Def Jam had been in a state of near-continual upheaval. After Steve Bartels exited as CEO in 2018, Eminem manager and Shady Records co-founder Paul Rosenberg took the job but lasted only two years. Jeffrey Harleston, executive vp of business affairs/general counsel of the label's parent company, Universal Music Group (UMG), ran Def Jam on an interim basis — which coincided with the pandemic — until Balogun was hired. By that time, nearly a decade had passed since someone with an A&R background had led the company.

Not surprisingly, Balogun inherited a label in serious need of reinvention. "It felt like there was an overreliance on the existing roster and not as much of a focus on what comes next," the A&R veteran and former rapper says. "The current roster was strong, especially at that time. You still had Kanye [West], and [Justin] Bieber was releasing a lot of music; Jhené [Aiko] had a big album. But the reality is, you always need that next wave of artists that's going to continue turning the page, and I put the focus on that from day one."

Balogun quickly set to work reshaping the roster, signing Muni Long, Coco Jones and Armani White while expanding into dancehall with Masicka and into Afrobeats with Adekunle Gold and Odumodublvck, in partnership with Native Records. Some of it has paid off: Muni Long and Jones were nominated for best new artist at the Grammy Awards in 2023 and 2024, respectively, and each won for best R&B performance in subsequent years, a first for any label in that category.

But the path forward, which Balogun says includes "being deliberate about giving our artists resources and nurturing them," has had its setbacks. Def Jam's market share has declined for the past three years — a downturn that began before Balogun arrived — and sat at 0.65% at the end of 2023, according to Luminate. And the label that once released culture-shaping music by LL COOL J, Public Enemy, Jay-Z, West and Rihanna had no chart-topping albums.

There was more upheaval as a result of the restructuring and layoffs at UMG in the first few months of the year, which led to Balogun reporting to Republic co-founder/CEO Monte Lipman and Def Jam's urban promotions and public relations staff moving into the new Republic Corps shared-services division. "It was difficult for us, just as I'm sure it was difficult for any other label to have to go through" layoffs, he says, adding, "I actually think we are more focused and more aligned and more set up for success now."

Despite these changes, Balogun's reset is gaining momentum and market share is on the upswing.

After Muni Long's "Hrs & Hrs" reached No. 16 on the Billboard Hot 100 in 2022, her latest single, "Made for Me," reached No. 20 on the March 9 chart and became her second No. 1 hit on R&B/Hip-Hop Airplay, where it has reigned for five weeks. That will lead into her forthcoming debut album, part of a slate of releases this year from Jones, Aiko, Vince Staples, Big Sean, Alessia Cara, Wale, LL COOL J and Chuck D, among others.

As Def Jam celebrates 40 years of history, Balogun says the label is driving forward once again.

Balogun photographed Feb. 22 at Def Jam in New York.

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CAPITAL SOIRÉE
OSTON
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CAPITAL SOIRÉE
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SOUND OF SUMMER
2024
HOUSE OF BLUES CHICAGO
JUNE * 13 * 2024
BENEFITING
MF
MUSICALLYFED
ILLUSTRATED BY WORKSBYELEE.COM
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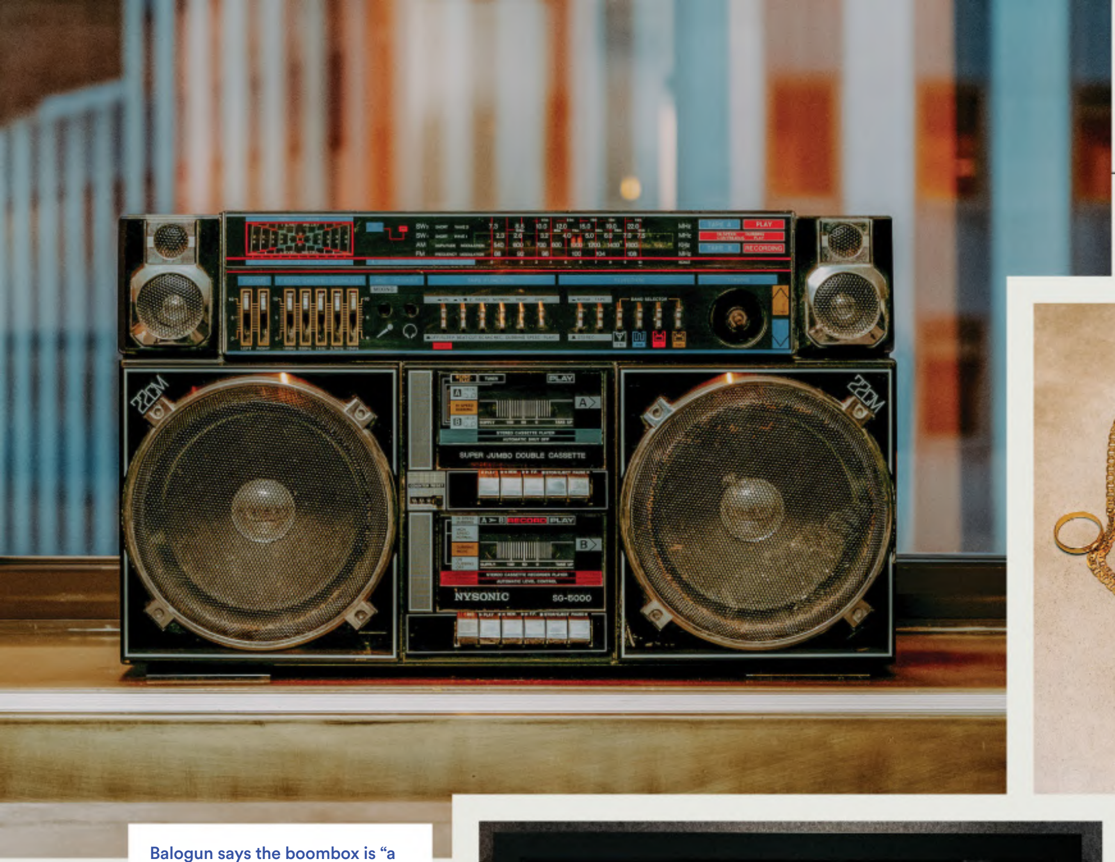
BMI
HOUSE OF BLUES
CHICAGO
curalinc
HEALTHCARE
RIOT
POP!!
Lakeside Bank
It's about time.
Virgin HOTELS
CHICAGO

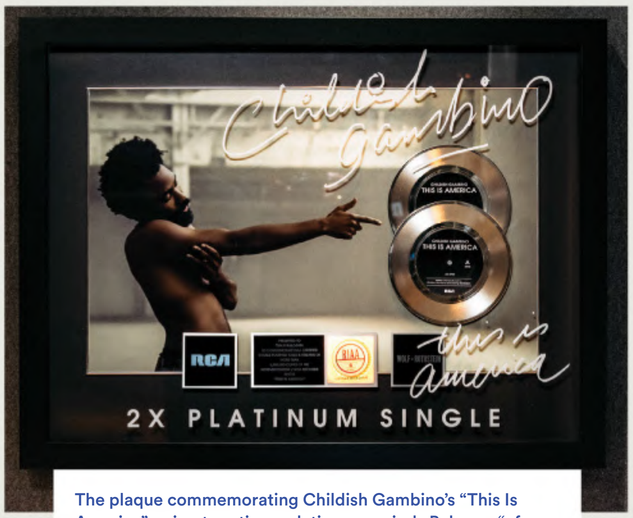
Wèrè Wèrè Music founder **Binetou Sylla** was tapped to lead **Def Jam Africa** in French-speaking markets on the continent.

Ronald Day was promoted to president of entertainment/chief content officer at **Telemundo Enterprises**.



Balogun says the boombox is "a reminder of my musical roots and the magical era when Def Jam began to change the world."

"My small but mighty jewelry collection": his wedding band and his half of matching Cartier rings that he and his wife wear. His mother gave him the chain with the charm and matching ring when Balogun was in Nigeria "reconnecting with my roots. She literally took the chain off her neck and put it around mine." A few months later, she "hooked me up to complete the look" with the ring. He wears it on his left pinky and the Cartier on his right.



The plaque commemorating Childish Gambino's "This Is America" going two-times platinum reminds Balogun "of one of the most unique and impactful records I've been lucky enough to play a small part in bringing to the world."

"I want to get to a place where we're not defined by nostalgia; where nostalgia is just a part of the magic," he says. "I do think we're heading there. But it's a heavy task."

Def Jam is 40 years old. What does that mean to you?
Def Jam, to me, has always stood for forward-thinking, cutting-edge Black music. And I'm careful to say "Black music" and not just "Black artists" because if you have something special like a Beastie Boys or eventually a [Justin] Bieber, it belongs on the label as well. It was the first label that felt like [it had] a point of view. If you plot the course of the label over time, there has always been risk-taking signings that reflect where music is going. The goal is to continue that tradition and bring it into the future. My entire career, most of my successes have been a little bit left of center: riskier signings, artists that have their own point of view.

When you accepted the role, what was your strategy, and how did it change once you got to Def Jam?
My plan was to look under the hood, meet every single artist and employee and have genuine, one-on-one conversations with them. I found that there was a lot of instability. There wasn't a focus on the new, which is everything I saw when I worked with Jimmy Iovine, John Janick, Peter Edge.

Did the label need a cultural reinvention?
Yes. I am a walking reset button for Def Jam. That's not to disrespect anyone who was here before me. It was more about bringing [the label] into my world and the way that I move. I try to be a reflection of what's happening in the creative community. That's always going to be my superpower: I'm tapped in with the producers and the artists. Def Jam has always been the culture's label, the most down-to-earth label, that feels like a reflection of the people. I want to reestablish those values.

How do you balance that with the need for hits?
I want more hits, but to get to that point, you need to plant multiple seeds and allow them to flourish. You can't just put [a song] on MTV and the radio and it's over. There needs to be 100 discovery points, a digital story, an [in real life] story, an artist proposition, a song that's special, and all those things need to align in one moment. When I started, I told Lucian [Grainge] that I'm a long-term guy and I'm willing to wait for the moment. I'm not pressed to chase numbers, chase the algorithm, chase the hot new thing of the week. I'm going to wait until I find something really special that makes my skin tingle, and then I'm going to go for it.

How has the UMG restructure affected you and Def Jam?
The biggest changes are in radio promotion, where now we work with Republic's rhythm and pop staffs. We retained our urban team, which now services the whole group. Since this is Def Jam, the vast majority of these records are going to start in that urban radio space, so it actually, so far, has been really seamless. The other major change is in the publicity space, where we now share resources with the Republic Corps team. From the inside looking out, it has been pretty smooth, and there hasn't really been much of a drastic change. We're very much continuing on that path that we've been on since I got here.

What's an example of how the new structure has worked?
A great example of the synergy has been the work that we've done with Muni Long's "Make Believe" record, which our team got started. We got it to No. 1 at R&B and urban radio right as the transition was happening, and then we seamlessly passed the baton to [Republic's] Gary Spangler and his team, and they got it to No. 1 at rhythm and now they're building at [adult top 40] and top 40 radio. The creative and the energy and the ideas are still coming from Def Jam, but once we reach certain thresholds, we collaborate with the larger team. That song is still going from strength to strength. It'll end up as one of the biggest R&B songs of the year, and it'll set up Muni's album. It feels like we have more tools in terms of artist development, and now we can approach things from different angles, depending on what the most effective strategy is.

One of the consequences of planting seeds, as you put it, is that Def Jam's market share has been dropping. Are you worried you're not going to have the time and space to watch these seeds grow?
No. It doesn't change the conversation I had with Lucian at the beginning. That's something that everyone that I deal with understands. I'm also not a dictator who thinks he knows everything. I'm willing to learn and grow, and for me, this [restructuring] is another opportunity to grow. There are things that I'm excited to work on with some of the other labels now that there's a possibility of doing things together. I'm already moving like that.

Def Jam scored best new artist Grammy nominees in each of the past two years. What does that signify for you?
We are making progress. But every single person who I've spoken to who has gone through this [experience] has said it's probably going to take three, probably four or five years. We're at the beginning of year three. My biggest fear was, "Am I going to be able to go in there and break new acts?" Now I know we're able to do it. Every time I've bet on myself, I've found success. I'm confident in that, and I'm confident in my team and in our artists. We're already on an incline, so I don't see how that stops.

How do you want the next 40 years of Def Jam's artists to define the label?
I want Def Jam to be the destination for the next generation of global Black music. That is my mission statement. In many ways, it reflects what the label has always been, but it brings in all the new scenes and sounds and strains of music — everything from U.K. R&B, to Nigerian drill, to *amapiano* from South Africa, to a really special country act from Missouri, the next incredible lyricist from New York or the next really special female MC from Atlanta. All these different worlds and sounds need to exist within this label. I truly believe that we are the only major label that's synonymous with pushing Black music forward.

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Porter's Call is a 501(c)(3) organization where artists can find support and encouragement at no cost. It's a safe and confidential refuge where they can deal with the unique pressures they face, so that they can thrive on and off the stage.

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WARNER MUSIC GROUP

It's Showtime

After breaking through on *Cowboy Carter*, rising country star Shaboozey has scored a smash of his own

BY KYLE DENIS PHOTOGRAPHED BY SAGE EAST

Shaboozey photographed April 18 at Dover Studio in Los Angeles.

WE WERE PRETTY prepared for this moment," says Shaboozey, lounging on the floor of a Los Angeles recording studio. While putting the finishing touches on his forthcoming album, *Where I've Been, Isn't Where I'm Going* (due out May 31), the fast-rising country artist is — perhaps for the first time — reflecting on how he arrived at this point in his career. Not only has the buzzy 29-year-old been working in music for nearly a decade, but a recent assist from Beyoncé helped spark a career-shifting breakout moment of his own.

After appearing as a featured guest on a pair of songs on the icon's chart-topping and record-breaking *Cowboy Carter* ("Spaghettii" with Linda Martell and "Sweet * Honey * Buckiin"), Shaboozey released a solo single: the jaunty country-rap anthem "A Bar Song (Tipsy)," which interpolates J-Kwon's 2004 smash "Tipsy" — and, just three weeks later, broke records of its own.

Even though his Bey-assisted breakout was unveiled first, Shaboozey suspects his solo track was the reason he was featured on *Cowboy Carter* at all. "Someone at Parkwood or in Beyoncé's camp heard ["A Bar Song"] from me playing it live and was like, 'We have to bring him in the studio,' " Shaboozey recalls. "Then the Beyoncé [album] came out, and we were like, 'Oh, it's time. Drop it.' "

After rising from No. 6 to rule *Billboard*'s Hot Country Songs chart dated May 4, Shaboozey and Beyoncé became the first Black artists to score back-to-back leaders in the chart's 66-year history with "Texas Hold 'Em" and "A Bar Song." His hit also debuted atop the all-genre Digital Song Sales list and has peaked at No. 3 on the Billboard Hot 100, marking his first solo entry on the chart. "A Bar Song" has also exploded on TikTok (soundtracking more than 150,000 posts in a few weeks) and has collected 64.9 million official on-demand streams through April 25, according to Luminate.

"I had been wanting to flip a 2000s song for a while," Shaboozey says, noting Petey Pablo's "Raise Up" was also in the running. "I just said, 'Everybody at the bar getting tipsy,' and then we were like, 'Oh, shit!' The producer picked up the guitar and started playing the chords, and then we started writing, just having fun and being creative."

According to Shaboozey, J-Kwon is "more excited" about the song than he is. The two have been texting ever since the first sample clearance request, during which the St. Louis rapper assured Shaboozey that his song was "outta here." (Upon its release in 2004, J-Kwon's "Tipsy" reached No. 2 on the Hot 100.) "Feeling like you did the song you're flipping justice and then getting that co-sign, not everybody gets that," Shaboozey gushes.

An artist who cartwheels across country, hip-hop, rock and R&B, Shaboozey is a product of the melting pot that is Virginia. Born Collins Chibueze in the northern part of the state to Nigerian parents, his earliest musical memory is listening to Juvenile's "Back That Azz Up," along with a healthy dose of Kenny Rogers and Garth Brooks that his father would play. In 2015, Shaboozey experienced his first viral moment with "Jeff Gordon," an independently released piano-inflected trap banger he says was "a whole moment in DMV music" that he conceived after sourcing a Gordon racing jacket and delving into NASCAR's fashion aesthetics. Two years later, another quasi-viral song, "Winning Streak," helped Shaboozey score a record deal with Republic, which released his 2018 debut album, *Lady Wrangler.*

In 2020, he scored a manager in Abas Pauti, whom he met through mutual friends. "After talking through our lives and hearing the music," Pauti recalls, "I knew that I needed to be around and support in any way I could." (Shaboozey is now co-managed by Range Media's Jared Cotter.) Shaboozey released his second album, 2022's *Cowboys Live Forever, Outlaws Never Die*, on indie label EMPIRE, saying his team there has "been down for the ride… it's like a family."

Since *Cowboys Live Forever*, Shaboozey has enjoyed a string of wins that set the stage for his breakout 2024. Late last year, he released "Let It Burn," the lead single from *Where I've Been, Isn't Where I'm Going*. It quickly gained ample traction online, even drawing attention from Timbaland and Diplo. And it was during those early months of his album campaign that Shaboozey received what became a life-changing call: a request to co-write with Beyoncé. "What I loved about [the] Beyoncé album is the inspiration and the influence that she had are probably the same as mine," he says. "We're studying the same things."

> **"FEELING LIKE YOU DID THE SONG YOU'RE FLIPPING JUSTICE ... NOT EVERYBODY GETS THAT."** —SHABOOZEY

Evocative follow-up track "Annabelle" maintained momentum while Shaboozey's live performance of "Vegas" for music discovery platform COLORS, posted in March just weeks before *Cowboy Carter* arrived, has since amassed 1 million YouTube views.

Now, as he finishes his third album — which he teases will include "crazy surprises featurewise" — while also opening on tour for pop artist Jessie Murph, Shaboozey is a front-runner to dominate the summer. But he's already thinking well beyond this moment. Ahead, he hopes to share one other thing with Queen Bey: "I want the Grammy." b

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Drake Milligan onstage at Desert 5 Spot in Los Angeles in 2022.

INSIDE LOOK

Coastal Cowboy

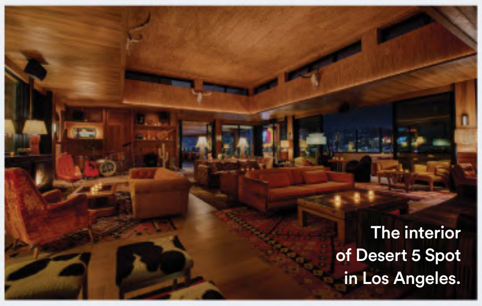
Why country-forward venue Desert 5 Spot is expanding to another major city

BY JOSH GLICKSMAN

WITH SPARKLING GOLD cowboy boots that double as disco balls, a corner dedicated to Dolly Parton and vintage storefront signage that recalls the spirit of Westerns filmed in Pioneertown, Calif., it's easy to see why someone at the country music-inspired Desert 5 Spot in Los Angeles would want to document all of its intricacies. Yet the owners of the multifaceted entertainment venue would prefer that guests abstain.

When Ten Five Hospitality managing partner Dan Daley and his team opened the rooftop bar in December 2021, they envisioned a location where guests could stay in the moment. "It was this pullback to an era when not everything was viewed through the medium of a screen," Daley says. "We wanted the exact opposite of that manufactured feeling when you get into another space and feel like, 'This feels fake because it's almost *too* perfect.' "

In June, Desert 5 Spot will open a roughly 200-capacity second location, traveling cross-country to Brooklyn's Williamsburg neighborhood. The venue will bring with it much of its style, such as the hand-selected furniture from antique sales and thrift shops across the West, various forms of its Boho desert-inspired chic and the affably named Dolly's Corner. Like its predecessor, Desert 5 Spot N.Y. will prioritize the live-music experience with performances from rising artists, DJ sets and an in-house band — though plenty of established country and rock'n'roll talents are bound to show up. (In L.A., Kane Brown, Green Day, Dasha and Noah Cyrus have all performed, while others including Lainey Wilson and John Mayer have swung by the venue.) Plus, it'll offer an array of weekly programming featuring line dancing and two-stepping classes, tarot card reading, a vintage trading post and more. Daley adds that there will be a regular Sunday-night party exclusive to the Williamsburg location, though keeps specifics under wraps. As for food and drinks: "L.A.-approved tacos," he says with a grin. "We're going to sling some of the best tacos in New York."



The interior of Desert 5 Spot in Los Angeles.

The venue's East Coast debut follows a year in which the top song and album were both country releases (Morgan Wallen's "Last Night" and *One Thing at a Time*, respectively). The genre's popularity has sustained in 2024, with pop stars like Beyoncé, Post Malone and Lana Del Rey either releasing blockbuster country projects or teasing forthcoming efforts. Daley expects the venue to embody the aura that has fueled the trend. "The ethos of country music is rawness, it's authentic; it's messy, but it's real emotion," he says. "I think that's why the genre is speaking to all different types of people now. It's part of this cultural reversal in terms of, 'Let's get back to real human connection,' which at the end of the day is what country music is really about."

Daley reveals the partners are eyeing other markets and considering further expansion, but the focus now is on New York. Still, it hasn't precluded them from growing in other ways: At the Stagecoach festival in April, Desert 5 Spot hosted a pop-up featuring performances from Shaboozey and Nikki Lane over the weekend and attracting attendees including Leon Bridges, Diplo and Del Rey. But as the brand continues to grow, Daley stresses that its core message to guests remains the same. "Our goal is for you to [leave] our venue and say, 'That was one of the best times in a really long time.' " b

ONE TO WATCH

Good Neighbours

Fox (left) and Verill

FROM London

LABEL Neon Gold/Avenue A (U.S.), Some Action (U.K.)

FOUNDATION Before they were Good Neighbours, Scott Verrill and Oli Fox were literal neighbors in an East London studio space last year, intrigued by each other's solo work bleeding through the metal windows. "We could constantly hear what each of us was playing," Fox recalls, "and on a spare morning, we did a bit of free writing together." Those sessions hinged on shared influences — Verrill and Fox both draw from late-2000s indie-pop mainstays like MGMT and Passion Pit — and "Keep It Up," one of the first songs the duo wrote together with its booming drums and yelped vocal hooks, formed a mission statement of sorts while the pair worked through demos in late 2023.

DISCOVERY In January, Good Neighbours recorded the oversize chorus of "Home," a bleeding-heart, whistle-packed anthem, and decided to float the refrain on TikTok without finishing the rest of the song. "It started out pretty quickly — a few thousand plays — and we got excited and said, 'If it hits 25,000, we'll get a pint!' " Fox says. Within a few hours, the "Home" clip had crossed the 1 million mark, and major labels were reaching out to the duo's manager, Joe Etchells of Various Artists, who signed the act in September 2023. "Home" was quickly fleshed out to a full song, debuted on the Billboard Hot 100 in February and has earned 77 million streams through April 25, according to Luminate. Instead of grabbing that celebratory drink, Verrill and Fox got their worlds upended: "We're constantly looking at each other and going, 'This is *insane*,' " Fox says.

FUTURE After lining up headlining shows in the United Kingdom and Europe for the spring and festival gigs for the summer, Good Neighbours released "Keep It Up" in April as their second single and are finishing more material to be released later this year. "We wrote a bunch of new demos in January, and we've got like 10 from last year — some of which are probably better than 'Home,' which is really nice," Fox says. Still, after recording separately for years before joining forces, Verrill and Fox understand how rare a breakthrough like "Home" can be in the modern music industry. "The whole thing has been such a happy accident," Verrill says. "We're still trying to process it."

—JASON LIPSHUTZ

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RISING THROUGH THE SMOKE...
Congratulations to billboard's
ROOKIE OF THE YEAR
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SONY MUSIC
NASHVILLE

Wilson photographed March 26 at
Paradise Pasadena in Pasadena, Calif.

Styling by Cherie Kilchrist

Georges Chakra suit, Sam Edelman shoes,
House of Emmanuele earrings, Minnie Lane rings.

COUNTRY WITH A FLARE

With her thoughtful songwriting, farmer's-daughter grit and self-branding savvy, it may seem like **Lainey Wilson** shot to stardom overnight — but the long road here is what's keeping her grounded

BY MELINDA NEWMAN // PHOTOGRAPHED BY JOELLE GRACE TAYLOR

WHEN LAINEY WILSON played Australia for the first time in March, she made sure to meet the country's animal ambassadors: She held a koala; she pet a kangaroo. But it wasn't all furry fun.

"I got crapped on by a bird twice," Wilson says in her thick Louisiana drawl, shaking her head in bemused disbelief. "In the exact same spot. I heard it was good fortune, so I was like, 'Go ahead. Do what you got to do, bird.' "

But if there's anyone who doesn't need luck, it's Wilson. With a perseverance and grit that's reflected in her music, the ascendant 31-year-old country star has made her own. After she moved to Nashville in 2011, Wilson endured a decade of disheartening struggles — including seven *American Idol* rejections. But over the past two-and-a-half years, she has broken records and reached new milestones at a staggering pace — all without compromising her traditional country sound.

When "Save Me," her urgent duet with Jelly Roll, reached No. 1 on *Billboard*'s Country Airplay chart in December, only six weeks had passed since her solo hit, the coming-of-age tale "Watermelon Moonshine," had summited the list — the shortest stint between No. 1s for a female artist in the chart's 34-year history. "Watermelon Moonshine" appeared on Wilson's most recent album, 2022's *Bell Bottom Country* (Broken Bow Records/BMG), which took home both the Academy of Country Music (ACM) and Country Music Association Awards for album of the year, as well as the Grammy for best country album — only the ninth record ever to complete that trifecta. And at November's CMA Awards, Wilson became the first woman to win entertainer of the year since Taylor Swift in 2011 and the first artist since Garth Brooks in 1991 to win best new artist one year and entertainer of the year the next.

At times, the rush has been overwhelming. "I do feel like the 10 years of nothing happening slightly prepared me, but I don't think you can ever really fully prepare yourself for everything coming at once, and you're just trying to hold on for dear life," Wilson says.

"Sometimes when you're moving that fast, maybe artistically you're not ready. But she spent 10 years honing her craft," says Jon Loba, BMG's president of frontline recordings for North America, who signed Wilson in 2018. "The music was there, the personality was there, the performance was there. So in a sense, that happened overnight, but it has been a long build. It's just the awards and the recognition have all come in an accelerated fashion."

One line in particular from Wilson's acceptance speech for female artist of the year at the ACM Awards last May encapsulates her personal credo: "If you're going to be a dreamer, you better be a doer." And Wilson is nothing if not a doer. On this late-March morning, she has flown 14 hours on a commercial flight from Sydney to Los Angeles, landing at LAX at 7:30 a.m. and coming straight to Pasadena for this interview and its associated all-day photo shoot, even showering on location instead of first stopping at her hotel.

Getting a caffeine jolt from an iced brown sugar oatmeal shaken espresso from Starbucks, she sits on a bench in the lush backyard as birds chirp. Clad in a cozy, loose-fitting sweatsuit, Wilson pulls her knees

Kelsey Randall shirt and pants, Double D Ranch boots, Brit West necklace and cuff, Minnie Lane earrings, Teneé Estelle Trading Co. and Modern Myth rings.

Dolce & Gabbana top, Norma Kamali pants, Charlie 1 Horse hat, Modern Myth hat band, Double D Ranch boots, Alexis Bittar bracelets, We Dream in Colour earrings, Minnie Lane, Modern Myth, Boochier Jewelry and Established Jewelry rings.

"There's nothing wrong with a beer-drinking song, but even with that, I think you can dive a little deeper and get people to think a little bit." —LAINEY WILSON

up against her chest to shield against the slight morning chill. She's not wearing any makeup, her long blonde hair sticking out from under a ball cap, her bare feet still sunburned from sitting in a Sydney park.

Wilson's relaxed vibe contrasts markedly with the electric buzz she says she's still feeling from the reception she received in Australia. "All I could think about was little 9-year-old Lainey just wanting to write music about my life and how in the world could somebody on the other end of the world relate to it," she reflects. "It just goes to show you that we're all a lot more alike than you think."

GROWING UP IN tiny Baskin, La. (population 200), 9 was a big age for Wilson. It was when she wrote her first song, "Lucky Me," while at a sleepover with a friend; when she got her first horse; when she went to the Grand Ole Opry for the first time, where she saw Bill Anderson, Crystal Gayle, Phil Vassar and Little Jimmy Dickens. "My daddy actually still has the ticket stub," she says. "He put it in the lockbox." And it was when she first knew that one day she would perform on that stage. "My sister was asleep on the church pew like she could care less," she says. "I remember eating popcorn and thinking, 'Oh, I'm going to do this.' "

She worked her way through high school as a Hannah Montana impersonator, learning how to entertain audiences at places like St. Jude Children's Hospital in Memphis and realizing she was "born" to perform in the process. Wilson, who calls herself a "fifth-generation's farmer's daughter," combined that desire with the whatever-it-takes work ethic she inherited from her father. "It definitely has to do with coming from a farming community, getting up and planting those seeds and watching them grow," she says of the diligence she applies to her career. "I really do view it as 'I'm a song farmer.' I just try to take care of what I have, and I take a lot of pride in what we've grown."

By 2011, Wilson had moved to Nashville, where her career as a singer-songwriter started germinating. But with a traditional sound out of step with the pop-dominated country in vogue, she had to survive years of setbacks before reaping her first rewards. She hit a low point in 2014: On her third year living in a camper trailer, career stagnant, the man she was dating impregnated another woman, and Wilson's producer, who was letting her live in his studio parking lot, died. "It was a lot of dark moments in my life," she recalls, "and I just felt not worthy."

(Years later, she would draw on that challenging time when she collaborated with Jelly Roll on "Save Me" and its desperate yearning-for-salvation theme. "I love Lainey's ability to be vulnerable, and I wondered if that would translate on the song," Jelly Roll says. "Lainey has such an authentic voice [that] I felt if she could connect with the song, then she could share these lyrics from a woman's point of view.")

Still, even amid those struggles, there were bright spots, like when her pal Luke Combs cut a song they co-wrote for an EP he released before he got signed. (Wilson, who considers herself first and foremost a songwriter, has also co-written songs cut by Chrissy Metz, Flatland Cavalry and Thompson Square, among others.) While working on her songwriting, she also started developing a signature country-hippie look, with bell bottoms and a wide-brimmed hat, and her sound, which combined traditional country with a slight rock edge. Around 2017 — the year she inked her Sony Music Publishing deal and a year before she signed with Broken Bow — she began tagging her social media content with #bellbottomcountry. "I just felt like during that time people were having a hard time getting it — everything from the way that I dress to the way that I sound," Wilson says. So she came up with her own clear explanation: "country with a flare."

Half-jokingly, Wilson says she succeeded by outlasting the gatekeepers. "I think we just kind of shoved it down their throat enough to where they're like, 'All right, she ain't going away,' " she says.

In an era when women still struggle to get airplay on terrestrial country radio, that has been no small feat. As her popularity has grown, Wilson has flexed different facets of her artistry — and scored radio hits — by both releasing solo songs and featuring on duets with male artists. After "Things a Man Oughta Know" became her first Country Airplay No. 1 in September 2021, she featured on Cole Swindell's "Never Say Never," which reached No. 1 in April 2022. The following April, her "Heart Like a Truck" peaked at No. 2, as did "wait in the truck," her collaboration with HARDY the same month. She then returned to the top spot with "Watermelon Moonshine" and "Save Me" in October and December, respectively.

"Honestly, there was not a grand strategy of alternating singles with collabs," Loba says. "Quite simply, it has been those acts reaching out to Lainey with great songs she connected with, and the timing has fortunately worked out well."

As Wilson's career gained momentum, Loba says that — in addition to making sure her music was where it needed to be — her team focused on stressing Wilson's authenticity, which was on ample display in her charming, gracious Grammy acceptance speech earlier this year. "She's not copying anyone else," Loba says. "At the end of the day, everyone can see her heart and is cheering for her."

Long-awaited success hasn't diminished Wilson's ambition — when asked if she wants to headline stadiums in five years, she answers three — but she is temporarily pulling back on the throttle *just* a little.

After spending only 15 nights in her own bed in 2022 and then playing 180 shows in 2023, she has trimmed her itinerary to a more manageable 80 concerts in 2024; following brief Australian and European runs earlier this year, she'll mostly play North American festivals and headlining shows (other than opening for The Rolling Stones in Chicago on June 30) for the remainder of the year. "I feel like you can see the light at the end of the tunnel when you hear, '100 less,' " she says. But with new opportunities come fresh obligations.

"As this career grows, I feel like there's a lot of other jobs that come along with it," Wilson says. Her expanding list of brand partnerships includes Wrangler, American Greetings, Stanley, Tractor Supply and Coors — and she even appeared on the fifth and most recent season of *Yellowstone* in late 2022. (Wilson doesn't know what her future on the show holds, but she would like to return if her schedule allows.)

"She won't say no, so we have to for her," Loba says. "Since we signed her, she has not left a moment unscheduled. Every time I see her, the only question I [usually] have is 'How are you?' We both come from farm families. We're not taught how to rest in farm families. From management to agency to label to publicist, I think we're getting better at creating that space for her."

"Last year was a hard year," Wilson says. "It was the best year, and I don't know if we'll ever have a year like that again. But everybody was tired by the end of it — not just me, but my whole crew. Everything we've said we would do, we did it. And then bigger opportunities would come, and you can't pass them up either."

And at a time when she could understandably be focused on her own material, she wants to leave space to work with other artists. With her appearance on "Wilted Rose" off The Black Crowes' new *Happiness Bastards*, she became the first act to ever feature with the storied blues-rockers. The group's Rich Robinson tells *Billboard* he and brother Chris reached out to Wilson because "her voice is so powerful. You can tell that she really feels what she is singing."

Wilson says she would "love to collaborate with Victoria Monét," especially after seeing her perform at Clive Davis' pre-Grammy party in February. "She just turned it on," Wilson continues. "At the Grammys, her [victory] speeches were from the heart. I was like, 'I want to be her friend.' " And she hopes to work

Roberto Cavalli shirt, pants and shoes; Charlie 1 Horse hat; Double D Ranch necklace and ring; Teneé Estelle Trading Co. ring.

> **"[Lainey's] true beauty comes from deep down where songs are born and written. People feel her heart and soul in what she writes because she knows what they know, feels what they feel and has the gift to present it in words."**
> —DOLLY PARTON

with new pal Lana Del Rey, though she hasn't written for Del Rey's country album that's due later this year.

As the demands on her time increase, Wilson is leaning into time-honored practices to help her cope. In Australia, she started waking up an hour early to pray, journal and meditate. "I do sound a little hippie-dippy, but it works for me," she says. "Just kind of starting my day with an attitude of gratitude."

She vows to do the same when her WME-booked Country's Cool Again tour starts May 31 in Nashville. "I have no choice because it has made me feel so good and grounded," she says. When following that routine, "the shows have gone better. I feel more levelheaded. I got to treat myself like an athlete."

OVER THE LAST TWO YEARS, one word seems to keep coming up around Wilson. "Whether I'm running into somebody and they're saying, 'Man, your life has been a whirlwind,' or whether the word's coming out of my mouth, or I open a book and see the word 'whirlwind,' it just seems to be surrounding me," she says. "Whirlwinds cause turbulence that cause chaos. But at the end of the day, you figure out how to come back to the center." Which is why it's also the title of her third full-length Broken Bow album, out Aug. 23.

She describes *Whirlwind* as "the Western sister of *Bell Bottom Country*," and lyrically more "introspective" than previous efforts: "I feel like it's got a little bit more character [and] cinematic storytelling." Wilson teamed again with producer Jay Joyce (who produced *Bell Bottom Country* and its predecessor, 2021's *Sayin' What I'm Thinkin'*), but in a sign of her increasing clout, her road band plays on *Whirlwind* instead of the cast of studio musicians who typically appear on country albums. "We've played close to 400 shows in the past two-and-a-half years. I knew they could do it," Wilson explains. "I felt like that's where the magic was going to come from this time."

Wilson co-wrote all the songs on the album. While her sound still leans traditional and her voice has an old-fashioned twang, her lyrics usually avoid country's common nostalgic bent and have separated her music from some of her contemporaries'. Longing for the imaginary good old days — whether in life or her music — isn't her focus.

"It's important for me to be proud of where I come from and the way that I was raised, but not dwell on it too much — because who really cares? Let's take that and move forward with it," she says. "That's just how I like to view life. You just got to keep trucking along."

While she has nothing against a lighthearted ditty — and has written a few herself, including "Hold My Halo" and "Straight Up Sideways"— as a songwriter, Wilson prioritizes depth. "I think about the songs that made me fall in love with country music and made a difference in my life," she says, citing Brooks' "The Thunder Rolls," Keith Whitley's "When You Say Nothing at All," Reba McEntire's "Fancy" and Brad Paisley and Alison Krauss' "Whiskey Lullaby." "I just think, 'I've got to do that.' Of course, there's nothing wrong with a beer-drinking song, but even with that, I think you can dive a little deeper and get people to think a little bit."

Listeners relate to the authenticity of Wilson's writing, says her musical hero, Dolly Parton. "Even though Lainey is breathtakingly beautiful to look at, her true beauty comes from deep down where songs are born and written," Parton tells *Billboard*. "People feel her heart and soul in what she writes because she knows what they know, feels what they feel and has the gift to present it in words. God bless her. He has and he will."

THE NIGHT AFTER her Grammy win in February, Wilson was enjoying a celebratory dinner in Los Angeles with her manager, Red Light's Mandelyn Monchick; Loba; and Broken Bow executive vp JoJamie Hahr when Loba mentioned his 6-year-old nephew was being picked on at school.

"Lainey goes, 'I hate bullies. I'm going to go to his school and do show and tell and sing some songs and say what an amazing little guy he is… I can make a difference,' " Loba recalls. "She has just won [best country album], and the night after, she's sitting there concerned about my nephew."

Wilson is a people-pleaser by nature. Say something she agrees with and she looks straight at you, nods and says emphatically, "100%." The effect is powerful — and that natural empathy has helped her connect with both fans and fellow artists. "Lainey is someone you can get in the foxhole with and get raw and real," Jelly Roll says. "She is also a very grounded person, so if I'm ever overwhelmed, I know I can call her."

Wilson attributes that down-to-earth sensibility to her upbringing, though she admits she has had to work to maintain it as her star has risen: "I have fought tooth and nail to make sure that I am doing the things that make me feel like me, [like] calling my family at home, checking to see how the farm's going and see if Daddy has planted his crops, [checking in] on my nephews, hanging out with my boyfriend on the porch and those kinds of things."

She went public with her relationship with former pro football player Devlin "Duck" Hodges at the 2023 ACM Awards, but otherwise vociferously protects the privacy of herself and those around her. In her personal life, too, Wilson has looked to Parton — who has spoken about the importance of keeping some things to yourself when you're sharing so much else with the world — as a guide.

"I think that was probably [about] her husband," Wilson says. "When it comes to mine and Duck's relationship, there's going to be some things that we can't escape and people are going to say and do whatever, but me and him are on the same page about the less we put out there, the less that we're going to have to deal with people making anything up and saying anything. We want to keep that as sacred as we possibly can between me and him, and so far, it has worked for us."

Wilson, whose first Broken Bow album features a song called "WWDD" (short for "What Would Dolly Do"), got to spend some time with — and glean some useful advice from — her inspiration last year at Dollywood. "She dove right in," Wilson says of Parton. "She was like, 'You got a good manager?' And I was like, 'Yep.' She said, 'Well, is he an asshole?' " Wilson pointed to Monchick and said, " 'She's a big asshole.' And [Dolly] said, 'That's all I needed to hear. That's what you need.' "

Parton has faith in Wilson's ability to navigate fame's tricky waters. "In this business, as in any other, you have to sacrifice and compromise to get things done," she says. "But I believe Lainey, like myself, will never sacrifice her principles and values for a dollar bill."

Another icon, Brooks, has also encouraged Wilson. After winning CMA entertainer of the year, she anticipated naysayers who believed her ascent had happened too quickly and that even her own doubts would creep in, but Brooks helped silence that inner critic. "He said, 'I feel like you've got the keys to country music and you're going to be driving it for a while.' And I was like, 'Oh, Lord. I hope I don't wreck this thing,' " she jokes. "But when somebody like him says that to you, it does make you feel like, 'OK, yeah, that imposter syndrome can just go kick rocks.' "

With that mindset, it's easy to believe Wilson can do anything — and to understand why, at the end of the day, she sees herself as a cowgirl: rough and ready, and hanging on to the rollicking ride she's on. "Being a cowgirl is digging in. Getting up, dusting your jeans off and not being scared to get your hands dirty," she says. "I'm from a long line of cowgirls."

HAIR BY GIOVANNI DELGADO. MAKEUP BY JESS BERRIOS USING ARMANI AND HUDA BEAUTY AT AMAX TALENT AGENCY. MANICURE BY THUY NGUYEN AT A-FRAME AGENCY.

2024 COUNTRY POWER PLAYERS

From left: HARDY, England and ERNEST photographed April 18 at Big Loud in Nashville.

EXECUTIVE OF THE YEAR

SETH ENGLAND

The Big Loud partner/CEO's golden ear and bold risk-taking helped him turn a boutique music publishing operation into a multifaceted hit machine — and shape music's mainstream

BY JESSICA NICHOLSON PHOTOGRAPHED BY ERIC RYAN ANDERSON

England

BY THE TIME Morgan Wallen began working on his 2023 album, *One Thing at a Time*, he was no hit-making novice: He had earned six *Billboard* Country Airplay No. 1s, and his previous release, *Dangerous: The Double Album*, had spent 10 weeks atop the Billboard 200.

Still, Wallen listened when Seth England — partner/CEO at Big Loud, where Wallen is signed in a joint deal with Mercury Records/Republic — suggested he include a particular song on the new album.

"Musically, Seth has one of the best ears in the business," Wallen says. "On my last record, there was a song that I almost didn't record, but he felt strongly about it and I trusted him." That song was "Thinkin' 'Bout Me," which ended up ruling *Billboard*'s Country Airplay chart for five weeks last year, peaking at No. 7 on the Billboard Hot 100 and going triple-platinum.

For nearly two decades, England's golden ear, entrepreneurial skill and penchant for strategic risk-taking have transformed what was once a boutique music publishing operation into a multifaceted hit machine with label and management components. Big Loud was named *Billboard*'s top country label of 2023, one of 24 year-end charts the label and its artists landed on.

Much of that success came courtesy of stadium-filler Wallen. *One Thing at a Time* led the Billboard 200 for 19 nonconsecutive weeks, tying Garth Brooks' 1991 album, *Ropin' the Wind*, for the most weeks at No. 1 on the chart for a country album. Wallen's One Night at a Time World Tour, which spanned three continents and over 50 shows last year, won him the top country touring artist honor at the Billboard Music Awards. But Wallen isn't Big Loud's only standout signee: HARDY broke through in 2023, earning Country Airplay hits with "Truck Bed" and the Lainey Wilson collaboration "wait in the truck," and this year, Ashley Cooke notched her first top 20 Country Airplay song with "Your Place." Big Loud's roster also includes rising country artists ERNEST, Hailey Whitters, Charles Wesley Godwin, Lily Rose, Stephen Wilson Jr. and Jake Worthington.

But more than chasing hit records, England, 37, has cultivated and supported a dynamic creative community — one with significant impact on music's mainstream — at Big Loud.

On a shelf in his office at the label's Nashville HQ, England has a small replica of Hitsville, U.S.A., home of the first recording studio and headquarters of Motown Records, one of his biggest inspirations. Close by sits a first pressing of The Miracles' 1960 hit "Shop Around," written by Smokey Robinson and Motown founder Berry Gordy.

"I've walked [Motown's] buildings in Detroit because I'm so fed by the energy they had," England says. "It wasn't without complication, because when you're so intertwined that way, the successes are big, but the failures sometimes hurt more because you're all trying together."

England grew up in small-town Illinois and studied music business and marketing at Greenville University, pursuing Nashville internships during his college summers. One was at publisher Harlan Howard Songs, where he met Sara Knabe (now Big Loud head of A&R), who connected him in 2006 with Big Loud Shirt Publishing, founded by songwriter Craig Wiseman (Tim McGraw's "Live Like You Were Dying").

"He was like, 'I'll do whatever needs to be done.' He had volunteered to intern for the summer, even though he wasn't getting college credit for it," Wiseman recalls, noting that England's initiative extended to even pulling weeds outside the office. "I thought, 'This is an industrious young guy.' " England aspired to become a song plugger, and Wiseman eventually granted him a three-month tryout.

"He gave me a trial by fire as a publisher," says England, who began pitching songs, including "Hillbilly Bone," recorded by Blake Shelton and Trace Adkins. His talent for calculated risk quickly became apparent: During that time, the then-22-year-old directly pitched the song "Ain't Back Yet" to Kenny Chesney.

"He hung on to an email I had sent and emailed the song to Kenny himself," Wiseman recalls. "Seth has always been a cowboy; he's like a six-shooter and has been from day one. That's what you got to be." The song became a top five Hot Country Songs hit for Chesney in 2010. About a year later, Big Loud Shirt Publishing had "an implosion on the business side," Wiseman says. "Basically, I fired all the adults in the building and realized, 'Me and the intern that pulls weeds are going to be running this company.' It was the best thing that ever happened."

Over the subsequent years, England rose through the ranks, eventually becoming vp of A&R. In 2008, he helped bring another future Big Loud leader to Nashville for the first time: writer-producer Joey Moi, best known then for his work with Nickelback.

"I would go to events with him and probably shake hands with 50 to 75 people I'd never met before," Moi says. "He was effortlessly introducing me to the entire industry. He's a natural-born CEO. And he's such a good pitch guy. If he wants something — he's going to convince you."

Moi moved to Nashville from Canada, and in short order, he, England and Wiseman partnered to launch Big Loud Management in 2011. "I'm a song person and Craig's all creative. Seth's that grounding force to make sure the ship is on course," Moi says of the trio's complementary talents. "That's the magical thing about our partnership — we've all occupied our corners, and none of us is trying to be each other."

The trio took an artist-development approach with its first three management signings: Chris Lane, Dallas Smith and duo Florida Georgia Line (Brian Kelley and Tyler Hubbard), which would put Big Loud on the map. FGL's debut single, "Cruise," released on Republic Nashville, ruled Hot Country Songs for 24 weeks, hit No. 4 on the Hot 100 and was certified diamond by the RIAA. The duo, which is now on hiatus, has 16 Country Airplay chart-toppers under its belt.

The act also arrived at a pivotal time. In the early 2010s, England watched how streaming boosted Sweden's music industry into a rebound — and though country music in general was slow to embrace it, he was an early believer and took steps to ensure FGL's streaming success. "I thought, 'This is the future,' " he says. Initially, his team sifted through data to create their own streaming reports; now Big Loud has a Ph.D. statistician on staff.

England's bullishness on streaming directly influenced his release strategy for FGL's "H.O.L.Y." in 2016. Sensing the song "could be bigger than your standard country moves," he brought it to Spotify's then-global head of country programming John Marks, who in turn connected England with pop-oriented Spotify executives Doug Ford and Mike Biggane.

"I sat in a Manhattan recording studio and played ["H.O.L.Y."] for them and they were floored," England recalls. "I believe we got the cover and the first or second slot on [the all-genre] New Music Friday." When "H.O.L.Y." came out, he continues, "it was reactive right away. I could've gotten in big trouble when people really thought I was renegading too hard. But I didn't want that rollout to happen without maximum potential. You win some, you lose some — but we won that one."

In 2015, England and his team launched Big Loud Records, with Lane and Wallen their first two signees. In the process, they created an all-inclusive powerhouse of publishing, management and label services, where artist-writers like HARDY and ERNEST pen hits for a range of artists (like Wallen) while propelling their own recording careers.

"[Seth's] expertise is connecting people and I have a passion for connecting people, so on the business side of things, I look up to him in how he runs the label and is a manager and manages relationships within work, which can be hard to do when you are really good friends with people you're doing business with," ERNEST says. "He has provided a perfect playground for me to develop my skill over the past decade." HARDY is still grateful for England "taking a chance on me early as a songwriter — not a guy playing shows and showcasing my songs only — and saying, 'I think this guy could be an artist.' "

Big Loud Management guides roster artists including Wallen (whom England co-manages with Kathleen Flaherty), HARDY, ERNEST, Cooke and Worthington. While that might seem like a conflict of interest, Moi says England's experience as a manager only enhances his work as label CEO. "Some managers can come through a record company and be very combative," Moi explains. "They're always thinking they have to fight for their artists. Seth's able to see that perspective right away, and it diffuses any kind of combative process that might be there." England says multiple artists outside of Big Loud have approached him to manage them, but he has turned all of them down: "That's not the centerpiece of my mission. My mission is Big Loud."

In recent years, that mission has required England, in his capacity as both manager and label head, to offer difficult guidance for Wallen, who was caught on video using a racial slur in 2021 and more recently was arrested on three felony counts in connection to a chair-throwing incident at Eric Church's Nashville bar.

"Morgan and I have always had a very close relationship. We've onboarded some new teammates in his life to give him well-rounded help. In a lot of cases, that decays relationships between manager and artist; in his case, it feels like the best year we've had," England says. "But [we always ask] the same question: 'How are you? What do you need for what is going on?' I think if you're a good manager, you'll know when the right time is to ask that. We don't condone it. We don't enable it, we don't encourage it. We trust that he's making progress and is heading in the right direction."

For now, between shows on tour, Wallen is in the studio working on his next album, which England says "is staying true to who he is, but there's a new creative inspiration happening. There are different sides of him and music he has listened to that will fuel a few of the choices on this next album."

England has led Big Loud's progression into a multifaceted music organization, creating independent ventures under its publishing and label umbrellas. In 2019, Big Loud Records teamed with singer-songwriter Nicolle Galyon to launch label and publishing company Songs & Daughters with a combined roster including Whitters, Tiera Kennedy and Lauren Watkins. In 2021, Big Loud introduced imprint Big Loud Rock, which has helped push HARDY's music to rock radio. Other partners include ERNEST's publishing company, Cadillac Music, a joint venture with Severance Records, and Back Blocks Music, founded and run by publishing executive Rakiyah Marshall, who is married to England. (The couple have two children.)

Big Loud also recently announced a deal with Mercury Records/Republic, which expanded its distribution services for Big Loud artists beyond the initial three it had already worked with (Wallen, Rose and Dylan Gossett) to the entire Big Loud roster. And in November, Big Loud partnered with Miranda Lambert and Jon Randall to launch Big Loud Texas. The partnership with Lambert is multidimensional: Following her April move to Republic, Big Loud will handle her country radio promotion and marketing.

Over the past year, Big Loud grew even more, adding offices and label managers in Australia and the United Kingdom and bolstering its Toronto branch. But despite occasional rumors that the expanding company is on the market, England says, "The fairest and shortest answer is no."

Big Loud 2.0, he continues, will "spread wider and collaborate faster. I'm a subscriber [to the idea of] having people around you that you want to be like. Certainly, that's [Republic executives] Monte and Avery [Lipman] for me. I'm not saying Big Loud is trying to become Republic Records in any way, but we are in a new era — making sure we are staying best in class and, most of all, providing for the artists."

"Seth has always been a cowboy; he's like a six-shooter and has been from day one. That's what you got to be."

—CRAIG WISEMAN

LABELS & DISTRIBUTORS

Aaron Bay-Schuck
CO-CHAIRMAN/CEO, WARNER RECORDS
Tom Corson
CO-CHAIRMAN/COO, WARNER RECORDS
Zach Bryan's rapid ascent has been one of the top music stories across all formats over the past 18 months. "His rise to prominence is nothing short of extraordinary," Bay-Schuck says of Bryan's meteoric climb. "We have had a front-row seat and big hand in the birth of one of the greatest generational talents of the decade, if not all time, irrespective of genre." Given Bryan's accomplishments and the Los Angeles-based label's success with country upstarts Warren Zeiders and Dasha, it's small wonder "Warner Records is now viewed not only as a pop label, but a legitimate player in country music," Bay-Schuck says. "Thankfully, our relationship with Warner Nashville is incredibly strong."
NASHVILLE CHARITY I SUPPORT "T.J. Martell has been close to my heart for my entire career," Corson says. "It represents the best of what our music community can do."

Scott Borchetta
CHAIRMAN/CEO, BIG MACHINE LABEL GROUP
Mike Rittberg
COO, BIG MACHINE LABEL GROUP
Andrew Kautz
PRESIDENT OF LABEL OPERATIONS, BIG MACHINE LABEL GROUP
Sandi Borchetta
EXECUTIVE VP OF CREATIVE, BIG MACHINE LABEL GROUP
Allison Jones
EXECUTIVE VP OF A&R, BIG MACHINE LABEL GROUP
Big Machine was recognized for two 2023 year-end *Billboard* honors: top independent albums imprint for Big Machine Records and top independent albums label for Big Machine Label Group. "Country is really hot right now and has a huge fan base that arguably only competes with top 40 in reach," Scott Borchetta says. "There is a lot of music right now that is really interesting, cool and new, but isn't readily identifiable yet that ends up getting thrown into the country lane by labels to capitalize on the genre's heat."
NASHVILLE CHARITY I SUPPORT "We support many, including our own Music Has Value fund that we created to support music in schools and music therapy," Scott says. "We are huge supporters of Vanderbilt Hospital and proudly have the Big Machine Neighborhood at the Vanderbilt Children's Hospital."

Zach Bryan's "rise to prominence is nothing short of extraordinary."
—AARON BAY-SCHUCK, WARNER RECORDS

George Couri
MANAGING PARTNER, TRIPLE TIGERS RECORDS
Kevin Herring
Annie Ortmeier
CO-PRESIDENTS, TRIPLE TIGERS RECORDS
In September, Ortmeier and Herring were named co-presidents of Triple Tigers, with Ortmeier joining from Universal Music Group Nashville and Herring elevating from senior vp of radio promotion at the label, which is home to Scotty McCreery and Russell Dickerson. "His dominant history at radio promotion and her experience running streaming and digital for the largest label group in our business supercharges us to compete with anyone at all levels and areas," says Couri, who also heads Triple 8 Management (McCreery, Eli Young Band, Corey Kent). He adds that the label has enjoyed a stellar record as of late, with "11 chart-topping songs out of 15 total attempts and 26 gold and multiplatinum certifications."
BIGGEST ISSUE Ortmeier cites gatekeeping at country music. "Instead of putting walls around it, we should be celebrating artists wanting to be a part of it," she says. "Artistic interest is, in essence, celebrating country music."

Mike Curb
OWNER/CHAIRMAN, CURB RECORDS
The label that Curb founded in 1964 turns 60 this year and continues to score chart and sales successes with contemporary artists such as Lee Brice and Dylan Scott, as well as celebrating 1980s powerhouse band Sawyer Brown's 40th anniversary. "Our greatest [achievements are] reaching our 60th anniversary" and Curb's vast network of non-major-label global distributors, he says. "Curb presently has 79 independent distributors throughout the world." Additionally, Nashville keeps benefiting greatly from Curb's philanthropy: In April, he donated $58 million for continued expansion of Belmont University's Mike Curb College of Entertainment and Music Business.
BIGGEST ISSUE "We need to find more new, innovative ways to break new artists to positively impact radio and the charts."

Seth England
PARTNER/CEO, BIG LOUD
Joey Moi
PARTNER/PRODUCER/PRESIDENT OF A&R, BIG LOUD
Craig Wiseman
PARTNER/SONGWRITER, BIG LOUD
Stacy Blythe
SENIOR VP OF RADIO PROMOTION, BIG LOUD
Candice Watkins
SENIOR VP OF MARKETING, BIG LOUD
See story, page 40.

Randy Goodman
CHAIRMAN/CEO, SONY MUSIC NASHVILLE
Ken Robold
EXECUTIVE VP/COO, SONY MUSIC NASHVILLE
Steve Hodges
EXECUTIVE VP OF PROMOTION AND ARTIST DEVELOPMENT, SONY MUSIC NASHVILLE
Taylor Lindsey
SENIOR VP OF A&R, SONY MUSIC NASHVILLE
Jennifer Way
SENIOR VP OF MARKETING, SONY MUSIC NASHVILLE
SMN celebrated the breakthrough of artists including Nate Smith (see story, page 54), whose "World on Fire" spent a record-tying 10 weeks at No. 1 on *Billboard*'s Country Airplay chart, while it was Luke Combs' award-winning success with his version of Tracy Chapman's "Fast Car" (which the duo performed at the Grammy Awards in February) that stands out as the year's "massive highlight," Lindsey says. "It has been incredible to watch a song that had such an impact decades ago cross generations, find a whole new fan base and become a staple song for Luke. It's the power of an amazing song."
BIGGEST ISSUE "Due to the cultural moment country is enjoying," Robold says, "one of the biggest issues for Nashville-based labels is that we are now competing with the rest of the industry for new signings, which is a relatively recent development."

Gordon Kerr
PRESIDENT/CEO, BLACK RIVER ENTERTAINMENT
Rick Froio
EXECUTIVE VP, BLACK RIVER RECORDS
Froio says Black River's studios had a "record year" in 2023, while its publishing company continues to grow — but adds that re-signing country star Kelsea Ballerini was the highlight of the last year. The "Blindsided" singer released three projects — album *Subject To Change*, EP *Rolling Up the Welcome Mat* and extended EP *Rolling Up the Welcome Mat (For Good)* — in under 12 months. With *Rolling Up the Welcome Mat*, Ballerini earned her first Grammy nomination for best country album; she also garnered two Country Music Association (CMA) Award nominations and three CMT Music Award nods.
NASHVILLE CHARITY I SUPPORT "Gilda's Club," Froio says. "This organization provides cancer patients and their families support, hope and personalized care throughout their experience."

CHRISTOPHER POLK FOR BILLBOARD

CONGRATULATIONS TO OUR

billboard

COUNTRY POWER PLAYERS 2024

CRAIG WISEMAN
PARTNER / SONGWRITER

SETH ENGLAND
PARTNER / CEO
EXECUTIVE OF THE YEAR

JOEY MOI
PARTNER / PRESIDENT OF A&R

STACY BLYTHE
SVP PROMOTION

CANDICE WATKINS
SVP MARKETING

BIG LOUD

Ben Kline
Cris Lacy
CO-CHAIRS/CO-PRESIDENTS, WARNER MUSIC NASHVILLE
Torie Mason
SENIOR VP OF STRATEGIC MARKETING AND ANALYTICS, WARNER MUSIC NASHVILLE
Kristen Williams
SENIOR VP OF RADIO AND COMMERCIAL PARTNERSHIPS, WARNER MUSIC NASHVILLE

Texas artist Cody Johnson keeps reaching new heights. In March, he landed his second No. 1 on Country Airplay with "The Painter," and, in 2023, was named iHeartMusic Awards' best new country artist. "The past 18 months have seen Cody Johnson's ascent to being one of the biggest, most fan-centric superstars in our genre," Kline says of the artist, who also landed his first entertainer of the year nod for the upcoming Academy of Country Music (ACM) Awards. "He is widely regarded as the next stadium artist, and we've had numerous people outside our building comment on his growing 'entertainer of the year' résumé."
BIGGEST ISSUE Country's ability "to travel at the rate of other genres," Lacy says. "The percentage of exported country music outside of North America and the usual suspects — the U.K., Australia, etc. — is, let's say, an area of great opportunity."

Monte Lipman
CHAIRMAN/CEO, REPUBLIC CORPS
Jim Roppo
PRESIDENT/COO, REPUBLIC CORPS
Tyler Arnold
PRESIDENT, MERCURY RECORDS
Ben Adelson
GM, MERCURY RECORDS
Alex Coslov
EXECUTIVE VP, MERCURY RECORDS

In March, Nashville's Big Loud expanded its partnership with Mercury Records/Republic, inking a multiyear distribution deal for its full roster. Previously, only releases from Morgan Wallen, Lily Rose and Dylan Gossett had gone through the union. "We feel very fortunate to have Seth [England, Big Loud CEO] and the entire Big Loud team as our partners in Nashville," Arnold says. "Over the past few years, they've truly become a part of the Mercury Records and Republic family. From our historic success with Morgan Wallen to now announcing our bigger strategic alliance, we're very excited to build on what we've already accomplished and continue to break and develop incredible artists together." In April, Republic signed country superstar Miranda Lambert, in partnership with Big Loud.

"Our greatest [achievements are] reaching our 60th anniversary" and that "Curb presently has 79 independent distributors throughout the world." —MIKE CURB, CURB RECORDS

Jon Loba
PRESIDENT OF FRONTLINE RECORDINGS, BMG NORTH AMERICA
JoJamie Hahr
EXECUTIVE VP OF RECORDED MUSIC, BMG NASHVILLE
Peter Strickland
GM, BMG NASHVILLE

"When it comes to our artists and our team, they can't be defined by one breakout moment," Hahr says of BMG's successful 2023. There are the trophies: Lainey Wilson received the most-ever CMA Awards for a female in a single year (including entertainer of the year), and Jelly Roll won the CMA's new artist of the year honor and was the most-awarded artist at the People's Choice Country Awards. There are the hits: Jason Aldean's "Try That in a Small Town" gave BMG label Broken Bow Records its first-ever Billboard Hot 100 No. 1; Wilson landed two Country Airplay No. 1s in 2023; and Jelly Roll's *Whitsitt Chapel*, with its two No. 1 Country Airplay singles, was the largest debut for an artist's first entry on Top Country Albums since the chart began ranking by consumption units in 2017.

Cindy Mabe
CHAIR/CEO, UNIVERSAL MUSIC GROUP NASHVILLE
Mike Harris
EXECUTIVE VP/COO, UNIVERSAL MUSIC GROUP NASHVILLE
Chelsea Blythe
EXECUTIVE VP OF A&R, UNIVERSAL MUSIC GROUP NASHVILLE
Lori Christian
EXECUTIVE VP OF MARKETING, UNIVERSAL MUSIC GROUP NASHVILLE
Rob Femia
EXECUTIVE VP OF BUSINESS AND LEGAL AFFAIRS, UNIVERSAL MUSIC GROUP NASHVILLE

UMGN expanded rapidly during the past year, launching Capitol Comedy Nashville with initial signee Nate Bargatze; film/TV production company Sing Me Back Home Productions in partnership with Mercury Studios; and independent services label Silver Wings Records in conjunction with Virgin, which signed Hueston. It has also "been an incredible year of artist development," Mabe says, pointing to Jordan Davis releasing two consecutive multiweek No. 1 singles, including 2022 CMA song of the year winner "Buy Dirt." Duo The War and Treaty earned its first Grammy nominations, including for best new artist, and Parker McCollum is selling out arenas after the release of his second major-label album, *Never Enough*.
BIGGEST ISSUE "The biggest issue for country music is staying true to its roots — 'three chords and the truth' — while evolving into global mass appeal," Mabe says.

Black River's **Kelsea Ballerini** released three projects, including the Grammy-nominated *Rolling Up the Welcome Mat,* in 12 months.

CURB: COURTESY OF CURB RECORDS. BALLERINI: HUTTON SUPANCIC FOR BILLBOARD.

CONGRATULATIONS TO OUR

billboard 2024 COUNTRY POWER PLAYERS

SCOTT BORCHETTA
CHAIRMAN/FOUNDER
BIG MACHINE LABEL GROUP

SANDI BORCHETTA
EVP CREATIVE
BIG MACHINE LABEL GROUP

ANDREW KAUTZ
PRESIDENT, LABEL SERVICES HYBE AMERICA
PRESIDENT, BIG MACHINE LABEL GROUP

MIKE RITTBERG
COO
BIG MACHINE LABEL GROUP

MIKE MOLINAR
PRESIDENT
BIG MACHINE MUSIC

ALLISON JONES
EVP A&R
BIG MACHINE LABEL GROUP

BIG MACHINE
LABEL GROUP

BIG MACHINE RECORDS · VALORY MUSIC · Nashville Harbor · BIG MACHINE ROCK · BIG MACHINE MUSIC · music has value.

WME'S COUNTRY POWER TEAM

BY KATIE BAIN

PHOTOGRAPHED BY JOHN SHEARER

Joey Lee
Jay Williams
PARTNERS/CO-HEADS OF NASHVILLE, WME
Braeden Rountree
Aaron Tannenbaum
PARTNERS OF NASHVILLE, WME

WME's Nashville office grew significantly in the past year through the acquisitions of Nashville-based Red 11 Music and Austin's True Grit, moves that brought in both agencies' teams and artists including Cody Jinks and Charles Wesley Godwin. The office clocked several sold-out stadium, arena and amphitheater tours from acts such as Luke Combs, Eric Church and Zach Bryan while helping guide the emergence of artists including Jordan Davis, Parker McCollum, The Red Clay Strays and Lainey Wilson, who scored four Hot 100 hits in 2023 and won this year's Grammy for best country album. The agency also signed a number of acts including Jon Pardi, Larry Fleet, Priscilla Block and Lukas Nelson.

In 2023, WME acquired Red 11 Music and True Grit. What do they add to your existing roster?

JAY WILLIAMS Whether it's red dirt or bluegrass, the lines between country and all of its adjacent genres are being erased, which is great for the touring business. The tent has gotten a lot bigger, and you can see that in tour packaging and festival lineups.

How do you see country music touring, which has primarily been domestic, growing worldwide?

WILLIAMS You have to think internationally now when talking about country touring. Yes, there are big headline tours like Luke Combs, Lainey Wilson and Chris Stapleton, but the club and theater business is booming, too. International touring needs to be part of the plan from the beginning, and we

From left: Rountree, Lee, Tannenbaum and Williams photographed April 16 at Pullman Standard in Nashville.

are seeing the audiences grow equally or faster in the U.K. and Australia. Other parts of Europe — like the Netherlands and Germany — are also starting to show some promising signs.

WME's Nashville office has agents across film, TV, books, endorsements and sports, not just music. What's a recent example of a country artist using all platforms?

WILLIAMS Lainey Wilson and her team have done an amazing job of leaning into all that WME has to offer, from making her TV debut on *Yellowstone* and notable brand partnership deals to working with WME fashion and the Wall Group [artist management agency]. We pride ourselves in serving our clients across the board, and the expansion of our Nashville office has significantly enhanced our ability to do that.

How has the country music explosion of the past two years played out in the live sector?

JOEY LEE Country music is thriving like never before, and the live sector is a clear indicator of this strength. We're seeing a huge surge in country stadium, arena and amphitheater tours, along with the rise of new festivals alongside established ones. Attendance numbers and gross revenue are reaching historic highs, showcasing the popularity and success of country music across the board.

WME's Nashville office turned 50 in 2023. What does that milestone mean?

LEE Over the past 50 years, through all the acquisitions and mergers, our dedication to continual improvement has remained strong and steady. We persistently strive to enhance ourselves and exceed expectations, creating strong partnerships with our clients. WME consistently aims to set the benchmark for excellence in our industry.

Gregg Nadel
PRESIDENT, ELEKTRA ENTERTAINMENT
Jacob Fain
EXECUTIVE VP/HEAD OF A&R, ELEKTRA ENTERTAINMENT
Elektra Entertainment's Nadel expresses immense pride in the accomplishments of the label's country artists. Bailey Zimmerman — who notched his third consecutive No. 1 single on Country Airplay with "Religiously," as well as a sold-out headlining tour — is gaining a strong fan base. He credits Zimmerman's rapid growth as a live performer and his cross-genre appeal, predicting that he's "one of country music's next big stars." Another artist, Brittney Spencer, is also rising after releasing her noteworthy debut album, *My Stupid Life*. "Having Beyoncé recognize her talent by tapping her for *Cowboy Carter*," Nadel adds, "is such a statement of where our roster is headed."

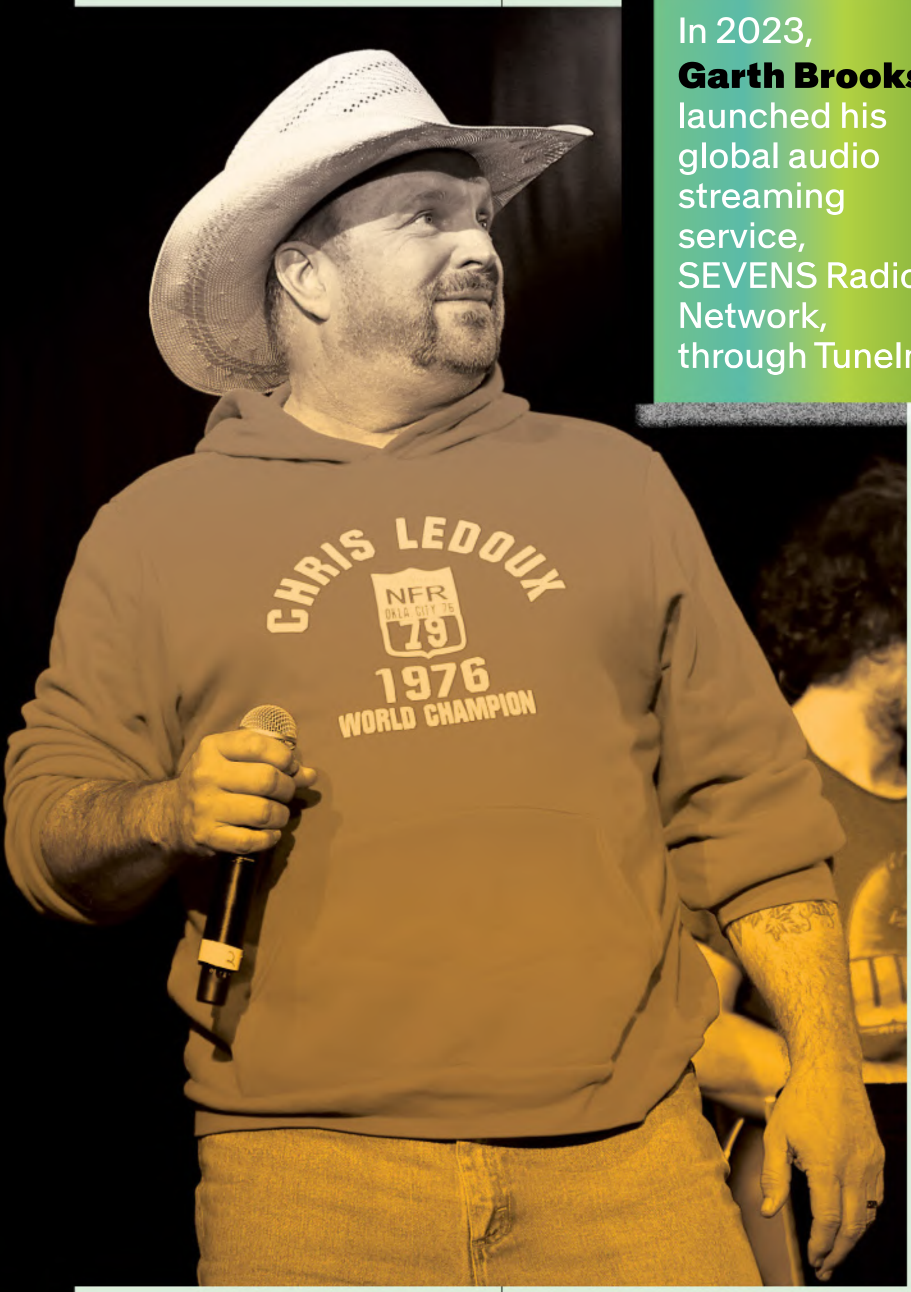
Lynn Oliver-Cline
FOUNDER/OWNER, RIVER HOUSE ARTISTS
Zebb Luster
VP/GM, RIVER HOUSE ARTISTS
Luster notes the breakthrough success of Austin Snell, who will open 30 dates for Jason Aldean and release his debut album this summer. River House also signed legendary songwriter Dean Dillon (George Strait's "Ocean Front Property," "The Chair") to a global publishing deal, "and he has recently secured cuts with artists like Miranda Lambert," Luster says. The company also created viral moments for Western rapper Ryan Charles with his song "Cold Beer Diet." "The overall growth of our development clients has been incredible to see," Luster says. "Our team's ability to navigate the always-changing targets of the music business is a considerable achievement, and we have seen success across many different genres, which is exciting in itself."
COUNTRY MUSIC IN A WORD "Expanding," Luster says. "So many artists are including influences outside of country music, making it more accessible to people beyond your typical country fan."

Katie Studley
VP OF NASHVILLE, THE ORCHARD
Though Kelsea Ballerini and Black River Entertainment planned a "quiet" release for her divorce EP, *Rolling Up the Welcome Mat*, it instead "resulted in roaring acclaim and insatiable interest," Studley says. The Nashville executive emphasizes The Orchard's agility, stating, "We quickly rose to the occasion." The renewal of Ballerini's deal with Black River Entertainment, a key Orchard client, is "a beautiful attestation of the power of our partnership and the magic that can grow out of the simple act of putting the artist first," she adds.
NASHVILLE CHARITY I SUPPORT "The Tennessee Innocence Project, whose mission is to seek justice by correcting and preventing wrongful convictions in Tennessee. They are a nonpartisan organization of litigators who fight for people in prison for crimes they did not commit and whose claims of innocence have gone unheard."

Bob Doyle
PRESIDENT, MAJOR BOB MUSIC/BOB DOYLE & ASSOCIATES
Shepherding the careers of country superstar Garth Brooks and newcomer Zach Top, Doyle relishes seeing both artists thrive. In the past year, Brooks has launched his global audio streaming service, SEVENS Radio Network, through TuneIn; opened the Friends in Low Places Bar & Honky Tonk; and is continuing his residency at Caesars Palace Las Vegas Hotel & Casino through early 2025. Meanwhile, Top's star is on the rise. "Zach has done very, very well for a young debut artist," Doyle says of the Washington state native, whose *Cold Beer & Country Music* was released in April through Leo33. "He's reminiscent of what the class of '89 was with Garth and — not to compare him to anybody, but — Alan Jackson and Clint Black and Travis Tritt."
CHALLENGE FACING THE CITY OF NASHVILLE "Public transportation."

Martha Earls
OWNER/MANAGER, NEON COAST
The past year was about expanding her clients' global reach, Earls says. In February, Kane Brown premiered the single "The One (Pero No Como Yo)" with regional Mexican artist Carín León at the 2024 Premio Lo Nuestro awards show, which landed on the Hot Country Songs chart. "These types of collaborations continue to grow Kane as a global superstar," Earls says. Additionally, Restless Road established itself as a European headliner with sold-out shows in London, Berlin and Amsterdam, and Nashville band Nightly was one of only six American acts to earn a profile on popular Southeast Asian social media platform WeVerse.
BIGGEST ISSUE "The responsibility of the labels to modernize new and existing record deals. What is being required from artists and artists' teams from a content, promotion and financial standpoint is far more extensive than it was in the past."

In 2023, **Garth Brooks** launched his global audio streaming service, SEVENS Radio Network, through TuneIn.



JASON KEMPIN/GETTY IMAGES

MANAGEMENT

Coran Capshaw
FOUNDER/MANAGER, RED LIGHT MANAGEMENT
Mandelyn Monchick
Zach Sutton
MANAGERS, RED LIGHT MANAGEMENT
The growth of Red Light client Lainey Wilson (see story, page 32) has been "explosive" in recent months, according to Monchick, encompassing TV appearances, viral moments and sold-out tours. Both Wilson's own "Watermelon Moonshine" and "Save Me," a collaboration with Jelly Roll, topped the Country Airplay chart in 2023. Wilson also took home the coveted entertainer of the year honor at the CMA Awards, along with a best country album trophy at the Grammys. Next up for the singer: a Hulu documentary as part of a bigger series produced by Robin Roberts' production unit at ABC News Studios.
COUNTRY MUSIC IN A WORD "Broad," Monchick says.

KERRI EDWARDS

BILLBOARD COUNTRY 2024 POWER PLAYER

KPEntertainment

@THEKPENTERTAINMENT

Ann Edelblute
OWNER, THE HQ

Shepherding Carrie Underwood's career is a multifaceted adventure for longtime manager Edelblute. Underwood completed her The Denim & Rhinestones arena tour through 43 cities, and her *Reflection: The Las Vegas Residency* runs throughout 2024 at Resorts World Theatre. "Carrie was the first female artist to launch her own year-round broadcast and streaming channel on SiriusXM, Carrie's Country," Edelblute says, noting she has since launched two new channels, Carr-dio by Carrie's Country and Savior Sunday Daily. Among Underwood's other accomplishments: performing the show opener for NBC's *Sunday Night Football* for the 11th consecutive season, stadium dates with Guns N' Roses and launching an ongoing partnership with Allegiant Air for its Allways Rewards Visa Nonstop Life campaign. **COUNTRY MUSIC IN A WORD** "Evolving."

Kerri Edwards
FOUNDER, KP ENTERTAINMENT

KP Entertainment's roster blanketed the country charts in 2023: Luke Bryan enjoyed his 35th top 10 on the Country Airplay chart with "But I Got a Beer in My Hand," once again hosted the CMA Awards with Peyton Manning and served as an *American Idol* judge, while Dylan Scott landed his third No. 1 with "Can't Have Mine." Cole Swindell took home single and song of the year at the 2023 ACM Awards for his chart-topper "She Had Me at Heads Carolina." Earlier this year, former *American Idol* winner Chayce Beckham ruled the ranking as well with "23," which is only the sixth Country Airplay No. 1 in the last decade that was penned by just one writer. **NASHVILLE CHARITY I SUPPORT** "The Brett Boyer Foundation — the work they are doing toward research for congenital heart defects is changing families' lives."

Kathleen Flaherty
CO-MANAGER, MORGAN WALLEN; EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, MORGAN WALLEN FOUNDATION

While Wallen is currently the biggest star in Nashville — with his third Big Loud album, *One Thing at a Time*, spending a country record-breaking 19 weeks at No. 1 on the Billboard 200 — his co-manager Flaherty hails from far outside Music Row. Flaherty paired with Wallen after 20 years spent in Hollywood, following a period in Silicon Valley, which helps her bring much needed outside experience (as well as a different perspective) to Wallen's superstar career. She is also the creator and executive director of Wallen's eponymous foundation, which supports youth programs in sports and music; $3 of every concert ticket he sells (he moved 1.5 million in 2023 alone) supports the endeavor.

Mary Harrington
MANAGER, WILD HEART/RED LIGHT MANAGEMENT

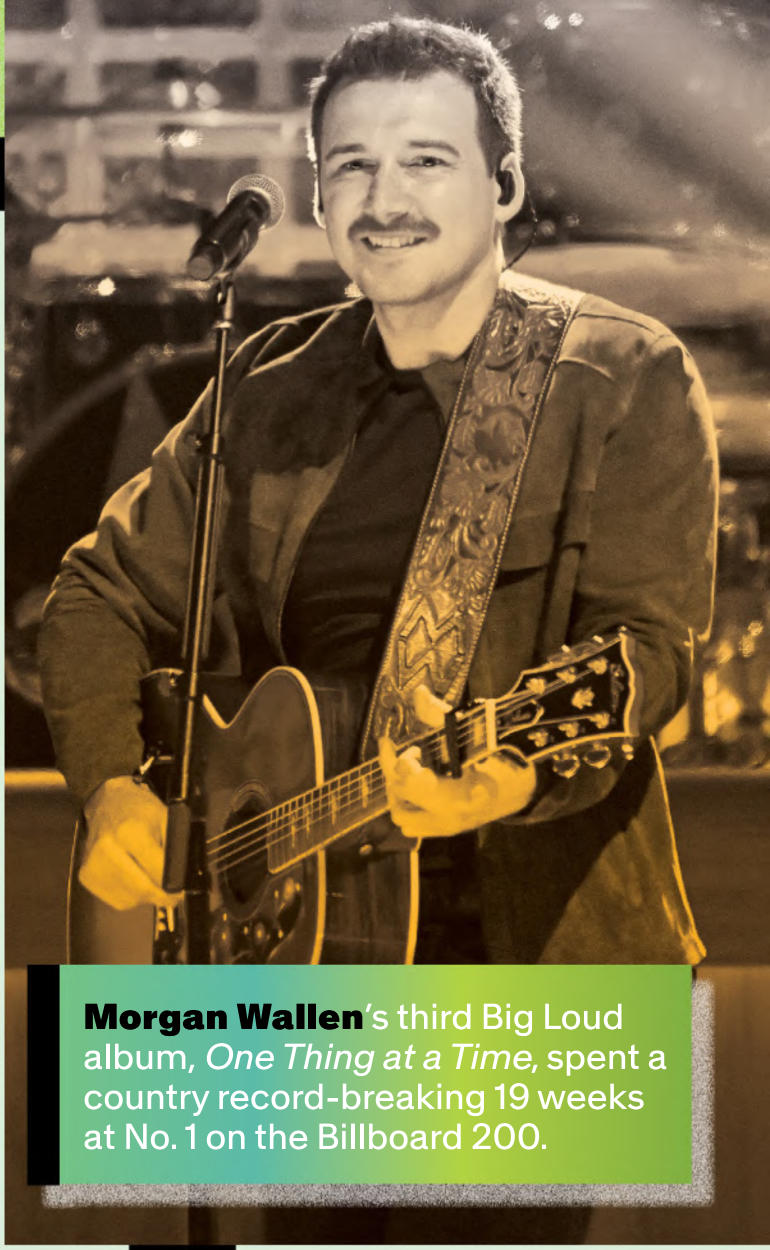
Last year, Harrington, who manages Lady A, among other acts, helped launch independent label Leo33, which opened its doors in April. The label quickly signed Zach Top, a talented neo-traditionalist whose "Sounds Like the Radio" single has climbed slowly but surely into the top 40 on the Country Airplay chart. While the music industry is increasingly focused on data-driven research to guide artist signings, Harrington, who also co-created and co-produces CBS' *New Year's Eve Live: Nashville's Big Bash*, remains wary of flash-in-the-pan successes. "Data has been a real gift to our business, but when not used in moderation, it makes us all very reactionary," she says. "I worry that we've lost the heart and intuition and work ethic that it takes to build long-term artist careers." **NASHVILLE CHARITY I SUPPORT** "I love Music Health Alliance. They are an invaluable resource for our creative and professional communities, especially when it comes to mental health."

Clint Higham
PRESIDENT, MORRIS HIGHAM MANAGEMENT

"While I am proud of so many of our initiatives, the continued ascension of Old Dominion from a van-and-trailer act to a headlining entertainer has been so gratifying," Higham says, noting it took "collective tenacity" to pull it off. He also points to Kenny Chesney — "an artist of a lifetime" — as a client who keeps reaching milestones, from performing in 180 stadiums to cumulatively grossing over $1.2 billion from touring. "The icing on this tremendous accomplishment has been how engaged his fan base continues to become year over year," Higham says. "We work hard to ensure he is supported at every pass." **BIGGEST ISSUE** The evolution of social media is a hot-button topic for Higham: "I will always stand by my position: The talent must speak for itself — and that is not often qualified through a three-minute filtered post on TikTok."

Danny Kang
Stefan Max
MANAGERS, ZACH BRYAN

Zach Bryan still dominates the country music realm. In 2023, he was named *Billboard*'s Top New Artist following his first Billboard 200 No. 1 with his self-titled album and his first Hot 100 No. 1 with the Kacey Musgraves collaboration "I Remember Everything." The single landed him his first Grammy for best country duo/group performance earlier this year, and he was also nominated for best country album and best country song. Bryan wrapped up his Burn Burn Burn tour at the end of August, which grossed $43.9 million and sold 475,000 tickets across 32 dates. This year, he returns to the road for The Quittin Time Tour, hitting arenas and stadiums through December.



Morgan Wallen's third Big Loud album, *One Thing at a Time*, spent a country record-breaking 19 weeks at No. 1 on the Billboard 200.

Chris Kappy
FOUNDER/CHIEF NAVIGATION OFFICER, MAKE WAKE ARTISTS

Jarrod Holley
Sophia Sansone
MANAGING PARTNERS/ARTIST MANAGERS, MAKE WAKE ARTISTS

After previously conquering the United States, Make Wake client Luke Combs visited 16 countries on his 2023 world tour, reportedly playing to 1.3 million ticket buyers as his career goes global. Combs is driving the fastest car at Make Wake (and has the CMA Award for single of the year to prove it), but other acts are making inroads overseas, too, including ACM new female artist of the year Hailey Whitters, "Good Time" singer Niko Moon, newcomer Cooper Alan and rootsy Texas band Flatland Cavalry. Kappy sees a "direct correlation" between the genre's overall growth and artists' increasing attention to their worldwide potential. **NASHVILLE CHARITY I SUPPORT** "Musicians on Call," Kappy says. "I love what they do in bringing music into hospitals all over Nashville and beyond. Music is healing, and when an artist is able to sing to someone in a bed and put a smile on their face, there is truly nothing better."

> "Having Beyoncé recognize [Brittney Spencer's] talent by tapping her for *Cowboy Carter* is such a statement of where our roster is headed."
>
> —GREGG NADEL, ELEKTRA ENTERTAINMENT

WALLEN: ASTRIDA VALIGORSKY/WIREIMAGE. NADEL: JIMMY FONTAINE.

CONGRATULATIONS TO

LAINEY WILSON

ON SCORING BILLBOARD COUNTRY
POWER PLAYERS' RECORD BREAKER AWARD

Smith photographed April 23
at Blind Barber in Nashville.

ROOKIE OF THE YEAR

NATE SMITH

He's making chart history now, but the road to viral breakout success was long and hard for the indefatigable country-rocker — who's still just grateful to have "a stable job"

BY LYNDSEY HAVENS

PHOTOGRAPHED BY EMILY DORIO

NATE SMITH IS hunkered down in a Nashville studio working on his forthcoming second album — but the rising country-rocker can't help but revisit his past. This is the same studio, he says, where he recorded his independently released debut EP, 2020's *Reckless*, which included his breakout hit, "Wildfire." When the longing, twangy song went viral on TikTok, it helped Smith score management, publishing and record deals. But that almost never happened.

"I was able to record that because my sister's husband loaned me $4,000 and we made a little investment deal," recalls Smith over Zoom, eyes widening in lingering astonishment. "They took a huge risk... But they were able to make enough to put a down payment on their house from [my music]."

During his wildly successful past few years, Smith, 38, has hit numerous milestones: He released his self-titled debut album in April 2023, kicked off his biggest headlining tour yet at the start of 2024 and topped *Billboard*'s Country Airplay chart with "World on Fire" for 10 weeks in February, tying Morgan Wallen — for whom he's currently opening stadiums — for the longest-leading No. 1 in the chart's history. But despite all that, Smith is mostly just happy to "have a stable job" now. "I paid my car off yesterday. From music!" he exclaims. "I can pay my rent and I can buy Christmas presents. That, to me, is making it."

Smith learned to play guitar at 13 and became a worship leader at 16 in his hometown of Paradise, Calif., and as a young adult, he became a certified nursing assistant. But at 23, Smith moved to Nashville to fully pursue music. He scored a record deal with powerhouse Christian company Word Records and a publishing deal with Centricity Music, but without much success, so he moved back to Paradise in 2011.

He may have stayed, too, had it not been for the deadliest and most destructive wildfire in California history. Smith and his family survived 2018's Butte County Camp Fire, but he lost his home. "If I had stayed in that apartment another hour, I wouldn't have lived," he says. Two years later, Smith packed his car with his remaining belongings and headed out to Nashville for a second time — now with nothing left to lose.

The Camp Fire prompted Smith to write "Wildfire," about how a love interest can generate a less-destructive kind of heat. Smith's managers, The Core Entertainment's Kevin "Chief" Zaruk and Simon Tikhman, recall receiving the song early in the pandemic and soon after requesting a Zoom meeting with the unknown artist. "He had this bushy, wide-eyed personality of a guy who you know has been told 'no' every single step of the way and suddenly had a little momentum," Tikhman says. "We just kind of fell in love with the guy and were flying to Nashville a week later to meet with him." By summer 2020, The Core signed Smith to a management deal. A Sony/ATV publishing deal soon followed, as did a Sony Music Nashville record deal in 2021.

"If you look at an artist like Nate and his tough road to get where he is today, that's the country story," Tikhman continues. "They call Nashville the '10-year town...' It has been a 20-year town for Nate." Adds Zaruk: "The music business is so hard. To see that it can work and to see it happen to someone not in their 20s... He is an example of how hard work pays off."

Today, Smith's work ethic and his own strain of rock-infused country have helped him collect two Country Airplay No. 1s. An alt-rock disciple, he has injected edge into Snow Patrol's "Chasing Cars," revitalized Nirvana's "Heart-Shaped Box" and often played Foo Fighters' "My Hero," which he calls his "ultimate favorite" song, during his live sets. Smith is also an EDM and pop fan; he recently met Marshmello and would love to collaborate. Sustained radio success, paired with growing mainstream interest in country music, has, Smith figures, provided him with "a lot of leverage."

"We're a little hillbilly genre over here, but [pop stars are] wanting to be a part of it, and Beyoncé coming in and some other folks... it's exploding the genre," he says. "They're still trickling in; Post [Malone] hasn't put his album out yet. There's an opportunity right now... it's definitely the time to go DM your favorite pop star."

Meanwhile, Smith and his management are working overtime to translate his current moment into a lasting career. "You can text Chief at 3 a.m., and he's going to get back to you," he says with a smile. "It's kind of sickening, but we're all like that." He recently started a new protein-heavy diet and has given up drinking — for now. "The name of the game is don't get sick and have endurance and be in shape," Smith says. "This is an athletic thing, and I didn't realize that... I love to party, but it's just slowing me down."

When Smith worries about losing momentum, his team reminds him where he was just a few years ago. "They always bring my perspective back," he says, recalling Zaruk's advice: "You were surviving before, working paycheck to paycheck and barely making ends meet. Now you're living — we get to live." Smith holds his freshly tattooed forearm to the camera, showing off some new ink that's still healing: "Live. Don't Exist."

John Meneilly
PRESIDENT, LEFT | RIGHT MANAGEMENT

Meneilly's success over the last year rests squarely on the shoulders of his star client, Jelly Roll. As the fast-rising country star's manager, Meneilly oversaw the singer's cavalcade of career milestones in 2023, when he earned three No. 1 songs on Country Airplay, sold out his 2023 Backroad Baptism tour and won new artist of the year at the 2023 CMA Awards. But of all of Jelly Roll's accomplishments in the last year, Meneilly remains most proud of his client's "philanthropic efforts and advocacy," even adding that Left | Right is "currently interviewing individuals to create a philanthropic division at our company."

COUNTRY MUSIC IN A WORD "Limitless."

Chris Nilsson
PRESIDENT, 10TH STREET ENTERTAINMENT

Scott Frazier
SENIOR VP/GM OF NASHVILLE OPERATIONS, 10TH STREET ENTERTAINMENT

Frazier says that since discovering breakout star Bailey Zimmerman, whom 10th Street co-manages, the company has made its country vertical a "major priority." In 2023, Zimmerman notched two No. 1s on Country Airplay, "Rock and a Hard Place" and "Religiously." Following his success, 10th Street signed LECADE (Big Machine Records), who has already racked up over 200 million streams globally. The company has also signed North Carolina singer-songwriter Kanaan Brock as its first contemporary Christian music artist. 10th Street is "not showing any signs of slowing down," Frazier says, "as we are in negotiations to launch a publishing joint venture."

COUNTRY MUSIC IN A WORD "Blurred," Frazier says.

Danny Nozell
OWNER/CEO, NOZ ENTERTAINMENT

There doesn't seem to be anything Dolly Parton can't do, whether she's rocking a cheerleader's uniform while performing at the Dallas Cowboys' Thanksgiving Day game or delivering a 30-song rock album. "Dolly's *Rockstar* album felt like a watershed moment last year," Nozell says of the gold-certified set, which topped the Top Rock Albums and Top Country Albums charts and hit No. 3 on the Billboard 200. "It was her highest-ever first-week sales, which was no mean feat for a 30-track, four-vinyl standard-format album," Nozell explains. "It was the culmination of rigorous long-term planning and execution from our team and just goes to show the continued power of Dolly."

NASHVILLE CHARITY I SUPPORT "Dolly partners with United Way in Nashville for the Imagination Library but has given away over 230 million books to children from birth to age 5 worldwide, and I support this."

Jason Owen
CEO, SANDBOX ENTERTAINMENT

Jake Basden
PRESIDENT, SANDBOX ENTERTAINMENT

Leslie Cohea
GM/HEAD OF TOURING, SANDBOX ENTERTAINMENT

Longtime client Kelsea Ballerini achieved a triple play with her critically acclaimed *Rolling Up the Welcome Mat*, receiving nominations for best country album from the Grammys, as well as album of the year nods at the CMA Awards and ACM Awards, Owen says. Kacey Musgraves achieved the best first-week sales of her career with her new set, *Deeper Well*, which earned 97,000 units, and her Zach Bryan collaboration, "I Remember Everything," topped the Hot 100 in September 2023. Meanwhile, Dan + Shay not only debuted as *The Voice*'s first double-chair judges but also embarked on a sold-out arena tour.

BIGGEST ISSUE "There is no true artist development at the record labels," Owen says.

John Peets
FOUNDER/PRESIDENT, Q PRIME SOUTH

As founder of Q Prime South, Peets feels particularly proud of the management firm's work in the past year with flagship client Eric Church in the opening of the artist's six-story Nashville bar, restaurant and live venue, Chief's. The rollout, which Peets calls "one of the highlights of my career," included sending members of Church's fan club a deed to a physical brick in the Chief's building, along with access to an associated virtual fan community. "Our website shows where your brick is located and who your neighbors are," Peets says. "Our goal was to make Chief's a physical and virtual mecca."

COUNTRY MUSIC IN A WORD "The biggest impression that I have been left with is 'growing.' "

Scott Siman
PRESIDENT, EM.CO

Down Home Media — the Nashville-based entertainment, media and marketing company launched by Tim McGraw in April 2023 in a collaborative effort with management firm Em.Co, and social content studio Shareability — has "multiple" film and TV projects in the pipeline, says Siman, who has represented McGraw for over 30 years. The "first placement" for the venture, which boasts investment from and a first-look deal with Skydance Media, will be announced "very soon," he adds. "We are building a bridge between Hollywood and Nashville in a way that has never been done, with a goal of creating opportunities for the Nashville artist community."

BIGGEST ISSUE "Growing revenue to cover the rising costs of competing within the entertainment world. Whether it's growing streaming revenue across more artists in country music or pulling a profit on the road due to the ever-rising costs of touring, how can we be financially successful?"

Clarence Spalding
Chris Parr
PARTNERS, MAVERICK

Beville Dunkerley
VP OF MARKETING, MAVERICK

Management client Jason Aldean nabbed his first Hot 100 chart-topper with 2023's "Try That in a Small Town" and expanded his Kitchen + Roof Top Bar franchise to Gatlinburg, Tenn., and Pittsburgh. Darius Rucker earned a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame and prepped *Life's Too Short: A Memoir* (due May 28 through Dey Street Books). *Terri Clark: Take Two*, due May 31, reframes her classics with artists such as Cody Johnson, Ashley McBryde and Carly Pearce. Brooks & Dunn recruited Morgan Wallen, Lainey Wilson, Marcus King and others for *Reboot II*, expected later this year, which Spalding says has been "great fun for us."

BIGGEST ISSUE Artificial intelligence (AI) "is going to be a huge issue for us to deal with," Spalding says. "It's not going away, so how are we going to deal with it?"

Simon Tikhman
Kevin "Chief" Zaruk
CO-FOUNDERS/CEOs, THE CORE ENTERTAINMENT/THE CORE RECORDS

Zaruk and Tikhman's Core Entertainment wins over the last year included the launch of The Core Records with the help of Universal Music Group's Lucian Grainge in July 2023. The executives point to gains by star clients as good indicators of Core's future, with Bailey Zimmerman's debut set and country juggernaut, *Religiously. The Album*, and Nate Smith reigning for 10 weeks at No. 1 on Country Airplay with "World on Fire" — which tied a record set by country titan Morgan Wallen's "You Proof."

BIGGEST ISSUE "Country music is now more mainstream than it has ever been," Tikhman says. "But that presents challenges as new fans, new artists and mainstream household names jump into the genre as well."

Dolly Parton's *Rockstar* debuted at No. 1 on both the Top Country Albums and Top Rock Albums charts.

JEFFREY VEST/ICON SPORTSWIRE/GETTY IMAGES

Congratulations
Country Power Player
Brad Kennard

concord
music publishing

Kane Brown headlined the opening night of London's C2C Festival in March.

JOSEPH OKPAKO/WIREIMAGE

LIVE

Holly G
FOUNDER, THE BLACK OPRY

Tanner Davenport
CO-DIRECTOR, THE BLACK OPRY

For Holly G, the launch of Black Opry Records in conjunction with music marketing and distribution company Thirty Tigers was a big — and necessary — achievement. "Considering the lack of inclusion of Black artists in the mainstream country music industry, we feel it's extremely important to build our own systems to support these artists and help them build sustainable careers," she says, noting that the label's first project arrives this summer. "We couldn't be more honored to build this label with the support of Thirty Tigers, who share our vision of putting the artists first and letting them create on their own terms."

NASHVILLE CHARITY I SUPPORT "Inclusion TN," Davenport says. "Intersectionality is a core part of our mission, and the work that they do here to support the LGBTQ community is invaluable. Especially in light of the legislation we see here in Tennessee that aims to target the trans community specifically."

Louis Messina
CEO, MESSINA TOURING GROUP

Rachel Powers
VP OF MARKETING, MESSINA TOURING GROUP

Messina Touring Group had its biggest year ever in 2023, Powers says, promoting tours by Blake Shelton, Ed Sheeran, Kenny Chesney, Little Big Town, The Lumineers, Old Dominion, George Strait and Taylor Swift. "Not only has it become increasingly more challenging to create a standout, meaningful 'moment' for an artist when announcing a tour in hopes that it will cut through the noise and garner the attention of fans," Powers says, "in a post-pandemic world, many country tours have had similar touring and on-sale windows, so we've had to become even more granular and in tune to who our true fan base is so we can find more meaningful ways to talk to them."

COUNTRY MUSIC IN A WORD "Talent," Powers says. "As an avid fan of the genre, country music has always captivated me because of the powerful, yet relatable, storytelling in the lyrics."

Patrick Moore
CEO, OPRY ENTERTAINMENT GROUP

Dan Rogers
SENIOR VP/EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, GRAND OLE OPRY

As the Grand Ole Opry approaches its centennial celebration in 2025, Rogers expresses gratitude for the growing attention that the country music staple is receiving globally. "I am pleased that we at the Opry have been able to introduce international audiences not only to the Opry itself but also to the artists who grace our stage each year," he says. "This has been made possible through our ongoing Saturday livestreams and growing portfolio of broadcast partners, now including a 10-week run of special Opry shows on Sky Arts in the United Kingdom."

NASHVILLE CHARITY I SUPPORT "My answer will always be the Opry Trust Fund," Rogers says, "because it helps our neighbors and friends in music when they need it most, but we also appreciate the opportunity to highlight and support other organizations through various Opry shows and endeavors."

Rich Schaefer
PRESIDENT OF GLOBAL TOURING, AEG PRESENTS

Adam Weiser
SENIOR VP OF GLOBAL TOURING, AEG PRESENTS

For Schaefer and Weiser, recent highlights in the country realm include Luke Combs' sold-out tour, Kane Brown headlining the largest C2C Festival to date, Zach Bryan's massive Burn, Burn, Burn Tour and the recent on-sale for Kacey Musgraves' 2024 world tour in support of her latest album, *Deeper Well*, which launched with two nights in Dublin. "It's exciting to be at the forefront of the global growth of country," Weiser says. "We are excited to continue investing time and resources into breaking artists globally."

BIGGEST ISSUE "Change. We need to embrace the growth of the genre. Country music fans continue to diversify, and more artists are entering country music," Weiser says. "Following his debut at the Opry in March, [Latin artist] Carín León released music with Kane Brown and Leon Bridges. He continues to write with some of the biggest artists in Nashville — we will continue to see more international artists breaking in country."

Tara Traub
SENIOR VP OF GLOBAL TOURING, LIVE NATION

Brian O'Connell
PRESIDENT, COUNTRY NATION/LIVE NATION

Julie Matway
COO, COUNTRY NATION/LIVE NATION

Aaron Spalding
TALENT BUYER, LIVE NATION

Live Nation's slate of country stars remains a major earner for the company, according to Traub, who says, "With the genre expanding in ways we haven't seen before, the global growth of country music is fueling demand for shows worldwide." That includes Morgan Wallen's 52-date tour, which was attended by 1.5 million people and grossed $302.2 million, making it the fourth-highest-grossing tour of 2023. "In the U.S. alone, the number of country shows skyrocketed by 30% last year, with touring country artists increasing by 40%," Traub says. "This explosion is led by stars blazing their own trail, like Lainey Wilson, who is achieving massive global success on her current Country's Cool Again tour."

Congratulations

2024

COUNTRY

POWER PLAYERS

LOUIS MESSINA

RACHEL POWERS

RICH SCHAEFER

STACY VEE

ADAM WEISER

AEG

PRESENTS

GROUNDBREAKER

THE WAR AND TREATY

It's pretty much impossible not to love the married duo, whose exuberant music is winning fans in Nashville and far beyond

BY NATALIE WEINER   PHOTOGRAPHED BY ROBBY KLEIN

THE WAR AND TREATY will make you believe.

Whether playing to industry insiders at Clive Davis' exclusive Grammy Awards preparty, attendees at the Country Music Association Awards or Newport Jazz festivalgoers, precedent suggests just about everyone in any given audience will be on their feet by the time the husband-and-wife act finish one of their explosive, emotive, genre-bending and deeply spiritual sets.

"The fans will walk up to us afterward and say, 'I don't know what I just experienced, but something happened to me while I was listening to you,' " says Tanya Trotter, the duo's better half. Universal Music Group Nashville (UMGN) CEO Cindy Mabe became one of those fans the first time she saw The War and Treaty, in 2022. "I was filming them and crying all at the same time," she remembers. "I went home just talking about this band." That same day, Mabe signed the act to its first major-label deal. Since then, this year's Groundbreaker has continued broadening the genre with riveting and endless exuberance — even if country radio has yet to catch on.

Both Michael, 42, and Tanya, 50, started singing in church before they hit double digits; Michael has a video of himself singing "If Anybody Asks You Who I Am" standing on the congregation's organ bench at just 3 years old. Those early experiences translated into a lifelong love of music-making and performing for both, though their path to The War and Treaty was far from linear. Tanya (née Blount) had a modest solo career in the 1990s following a cameo in *Sister Act 2: Back in the Habit* singing alongside Lauryn Hill, including one track that cracked the Billboard Hot 100 in 1994; Cleveland native Michael dabbled in rapping, influenced by the success of local heroes Bone Thugs-N-Harmony, before eventually enlisting in the Army in 2003. While serving two tours in Iraq, he composed songs for his fallen comrades, even winning a "Military Idol" contest.

The couple met shortly after Michael had returned stateside — fittingly, at an arts festival where he was trying to launch a solo career. Tanya had long since stepped away from music and was working as a worship leader; the couple married and had a son, Legend (yes, named for John), in 2011. They didn't realize the potency of their combined voices until several years later, though, while recording a demo of a song Michael had written for Tanya's brother. A friend heard it and practically demanded they keep making music together.

That off-the-cuff duet in 2014 opened their eyes to a world of musical possibilities, but their path forward wasn't easy or clear-cut. Michael still struggles with PTSD — at times so severely that he has said he contemplated suicide — and the couple also faced homelessness. Musically, they first found a home in Americana: In 2018, Thirty Tigers distributed their second album, *Healing Tide*, which featured a collaboration with Emmylou Harris, and they have won three Americana Music Awards. As the duo's star kept rising, major country labels came calling, leading to the pair's UMGN signing and subsequent major-label debut, 2023's *Lover's Game*, produced by Dave Cobb.

This past year, The War and Treaty were one of two country acts nominated in the Grammys' best new artist category; the other was Jelly Roll, whom the Trotters consider a peer in making the genre more inclusive. "The space we occupied was really important," Michael says. "The two artists representing the genre were not representative of that genre at all, if we're being completely transparent. You got Jelly Roll, a tatted-face rapper who can sing a little bit, and Mike and Tanya, these Black, overweight, gospel-trained singers. Country music is actively trying to attack the narrative it has created, and I'm proud to be part of that change."

Though they are self-described outliers on the still-too-homogeneous Music Row, the Trotters say their Nashville peers have strongly supported them. It started with Dierks Bentley — who invited them to join him onstage for their first country awards show performance in 2021 and included them on a live album shortly thereafter — and continued with Keith Urban, Miranda Lambert and Chris Stapleton, for whom the duo will open three dates in May. Zach Bryan asked the Trotters to sing with him on his self-titled album after hearing them at the 2023 Academy of Country Music Awards, converted just like all the rest. The resulting song, "Hey Driver," reached No. 14 on the Hot 100 — The War and Treaty's highest chart entry to date — and the act will open Bryan's three-night Los Angeles arena run in June, inevitably earning even more new fans.

Michael and Tanya are relentlessly positive, but they won't ignore the obvious. "How about Mickey Guyton?" Michael says. "It all begins with her saying, 'This is what country music looks like, too.' " With Beyoncé's *Cowboy Carter* shining a new spotlight on country music's long history of racial exclusion, the duo readily acknowledges the work that remains to correct that past. (Beyoncé reached out to the Trotters after *Cowboy Carter*'s release but did not seek to collaborate with them.) "Have we experienced it?" Tanya asks. "Of course we have. Do we see it in the crowds? Of course we do."

But they insist on pushing forward. "We've been sort of a healing balm, and I won't allow anyone to take that away from Tanya and I," Michael says. "We've been taken out on the road not to check a box, but literally because we've impacted some of the most powerful artists in our genre today."

"My purpose is to really broaden what country music is and has always been," UMGN's Mabe says. "Finding them was like finding a needle in a haystack. They are an evolution of a format... Absolutely, we will eventually end up [bringing them to] country radio."

That impact has been made because of the way Michael and Tanya translate their gospel bona fides into potent, generous and agnostic performances. "When you think of a gospel sound, you're thinking of that sense of urgency — regardless of what my message is," Michael says. "That sense that I need you to understand what I'm saying, that's what we're after. When somebody taps into that good truth, it just comes out with that roar and that fire." There's no scorched earth in the Trotters' wake, though, just the one thing they're interested in evangelizing: love.

Michael and Tanya Trotter photographed April 15 at Ryman Auditorium in Nashville.

UTA client **Oliver Anthony** became just the sixth artist whose first solo Hot 100 entry debuted at No. 1, with "Rich Men North of Richmond."

Stacy Vee
EXECUTIVE VP, GOLDENVOICE

After more than two decades at Goldenvoice, Vee still aims high. The lineup for Stagecoach sold out far in advance of the April festival due to "the most boundary-pushing lineup I have ever booked," Vee says. Eric Church, Miranda Lambert and Morgan Wallen headlined the Southern California event's 2024 edition, which also featured sets from Post Malone, Leon Bridges, Carín León, Willie Nelson and The Beach Boys. The lineup is a point of pride, Vee adds, "not only for my team and [me] but for country music in general." **BIGGEST ISSUE** "There are so many things evolving and changing every day, a constant chain reaction. I, however, don't see it as an issue to deal with. I see it as an opportunity to challenge myself and push the genre forward."

AGENCIES

Marc Dennis
Jeff Krones
Darin Murphy
CO-HEADS, CAA MUSIC NASHVILLE, CAA
Hunter Williams
MUSIC AGENT, CAA

"We've had a number of big moments over the past year that we're really proud of," Murphy says. CAA continued to support the visions of clients including Kelsea Ballerini, Maren Morris, Zac Brown Band, Willie Nelson, The Chicks, Carrie Underwood and Jelly Roll, the lattermost of whom charted five Hot 100 hits over the last year. Little Night of Music, the charity that the agency hosts in collaboration with Nashville nonprofit PENCIL, is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, having raised over $3 million for Nashville Public Schools since its inception. **BIGGEST ISSUE** "Sustaining this current momentum, consumption and engagement," Williams says, "which seems to be at a record level at the moment."

Jeffrey Hasson
CO-HEAD OF UTA NASHVILLE, UTA
Curt Motley
Elisa Vazzana
Emily Wright
AGENTS, UTA

UTA client Oliver Anthony exploded last summer when he became just the sixth artist to debut at No. 1 with his first solo Hot 100 entry (his viral hit "Rich Men North of Richmond"). Megan Moroney also had a big year, scoring six ACM Award nominations in April. The UTA team is "so proud of the artists we've had the privilege of discovering and helping to break," Hasson says. "From day one, our goal has been to find and support unique voices, and it's incredibly rewarding to see these artists reach new heights like sold-out tours and No. 1 singles." **COUNTRY MUSIC IN A WORD** "Dominating," Hasson says.

Joey Lee
Jay Williams
PARTNERS/CO-HEADS OF NASHVILLE, WME
Braeden Rountree
Aaron Tannenbaum
PARTNERS OF NASHVILLE, WME

See story, page 48.

Jonathan Levine
EXECUTIVE VP/MANAGING EXECUTIVE, WASSERMAN MUSIC
Mike Betterton
Keith Levy
SENIOR VPs, WASSERMAN MUSIC
Shannon Casey
SENIOR VP OF FAIRS AND FESTIVALS, WASSERMAN MUSIC

Levine says Wasserman's biggest achievement is "having the honor to represent so many of the most impactful artists across the broad spectrum of country music," from Billboard Boxscore's highest-grossing country artist of all time, Kenny Chesney, and stars Old Dominion, Brandi Carlile, Tyler Childers, Noah Kahan, The Lumineers, Margo Price and Sturgill Simpson to breakthrough and rising artists like Sierra Farrell, Morgan Wade, Mickey Guyton and Katie Pruitt. "Having a client roster of that caliber and breadth," he adds, "gives us the opportunity to play a key role in the ongoing diversification of country and Americana music — in reach, scope and definition — as it becomes a bigger, more inclusive tent."

Austin Neal
CO-HEAD, THE NEAL AGENCY

Morgan Wallen's One Night at a Time World Tour played 52 dates in 2023 to 1.5 million fans. The Neal Agency superstar landed multiple entries on *Billboard*'s 2023 year-end Top Boxscores chart and earned the No. 4 spot on the annual Top Tours ranking. In addition, The Neal Agency continues to play and win the long game with significant milestones such as the launch of TNA Publishing. "This was the first step in becoming more than just a touring company and continuing the vision of creating an artist-centered modern music company," Neal says. **BIGGEST ISSUE** "Oversaturation. With the popularity [of country music] increasing, so have the amount of new artists. I think artist development continues to suffer, and on the live side, I think we could see an impact based on the sheer amount of shows in the market."

MEDIA

Emily Bowman
ARTIST PARTNERSHIPS MANAGER, TIKTOK

TikTok's new feature, Add to Music App, which launched at the end of 2023, has further propelled the platform. "This feature gives music fans the ability to save the songs they discover on TikTok on the music streaming services of their choice," Bowman says. "The launch of this product has been so exciting to watch as artists, like Dasha with her track 'Austin,' can connect the dots between their music on-platform and the success they are finding off-platform." **BIGGEST ISSUE** "As country music continues to expand into a global market, it opens the question of how to best market the genre to a broader audience. TikTok offers a fresh approach to promotion while honoring the genre's roots through storytelling."

Randy Chase
EXECUTIVE VP OF PROGRAMMING, SUMMIT MEDIA

As the number of programmers willing to step out on new music seems to decrease, Chase has not shied away from the challenge: "In the past year, Summit has made great strides in its country portfolio," he says. "Despite tough competition, KTTS Springfield, Mo., grew, reestablishing itself as a market leader." He adds, "WZZK Birmingham, Ala., and WKHK Richmond [Va.] have achieved impressive 10-year ratings highs, a testament to their sustained audience engagement by delivering on consumer expectations." Summit Media's country stations have experienced an 11% increase in streaming, which Chase calls "a clear reflection of the digital growth of radio" that "underscores Summit's unwavering commitment to new music, innovation and adaptability as the country format evolves."

> Having a deep talent roster "gives us the opportunity to play a key role in the ongoing diversification of country and Americana music — in reach, scope and definition."
> —JONATHAN LEVINE, WASSERMAN MUSIC

ANTHONY: JASON KEMPIN/GETTY IMAGES. LEVINE: FIONA BATTERSBY.

CONGRATULATIONS

MTG
MESSINA TOURING GROUP

LOUIS MESSINA
FOUNDER & CEO

RACHEL POWERS
VICE PRESIDENT, MARKETING

2024 COUNTRY POWER PLAYERS

Dan + Shay, along with another 25 country acts, participated in a guest DJ series surrounding the launch of SiriusXM's new app.

Johnny Chiang
VP OF MUSIC PROGRAMMING FOR COUNTRY, SIRIUSXM
Bekah Digby
ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR OF ARTIST AND INDUSTRY RELATIONS FOR COUNTRY AND CHRISTIAN, SIRIUSXM

Chiang highlights the successful integration of Pandora's and SiriusXM's country programming to present the platforms as a single unit to the Nashville music community. "We've made the industry aware that we're the only audio entity that can provide both digital streams and over-the-air spins at the same time, giving unprecedented exposure and cross-promotional opportunities for artists, especially emerging artists," he says. Digby adds that 26 country acts participated in a guest DJ series around the launch of SiriusXM's new app, including major stars such as Luke Combs, Lainey Wilson, Jelly Roll and Dan + Shay.

BIGGEST ISSUE "The ever-decreasing efforts by terrestrial country radio to foster new music discovery," Chiang says.

Charlie Cook
VP OF COUNTRY/PROGRAM DIRECTOR, WSM-FM (95.5 NASH ICON) NASHVILLE/WKDF (103-3 COUNTRY) NASHVILLE, CUMULUS MEDIA
Mike Moore
PROGRAM DIRECTOR, WKHX-FM (NEW COUNTRY 101-FIVE) ATLANTA, CUMULUS MEDIA
Mike Preston
PROGRAM DIRECTOR, KPLX-FM (99.5 THE WOLF)/KSCS-FM (NEW COUNTRY 96.3) DALLAS, CUMULUS MEDIA

Cook, who has been one of radio's prominent gatekeepers since the 1980s and has overseen Cumulus Nashville brands including WSM-FM and WKDF for more than 10 years, announced that he'll step down at the end of May, but notes he will leave with Cumulus in a great place. "Cumulus continues to focus on content that benefits the fans of our stations and to that [end] has shown year-over-year growth for 23 straight months in the [Portable People Meter] markets," Cook says. "WKDF just celebrated the highest ratings in the station's 25 years in the country format."

BIGGEST ISSUE "Too much good music. I know, who would think that this is a problem?" Cook says. "It is important for the format to find room for all of the music. Balancing frequency and exposure is a talent — one that is criticized weekly."

Top (left) and Williams

WME's Jay Williams Wins *Billboard*'s 2024 Country Power Players' Choice Award

Billboard Pro members have selected Jay Williams, partner and co-head of WME's Nashville office, as the recipient of this year's Billboard Country Power Players' Choice Award. The peer-voted accolade honors the country music executive who Billboard Pro members believe made the most impact across the industry in the past year.

Williams helps guide the careers of artists ranging from stadium and arena headliners to rising acts, with a roster including Dierks Bentley, Luke Bryan, Eric Church, Brothers Osborne, Chris Stapleton, Luke Combs, Lainey Wilson, Ashley McBryde, Molly Tuttle & Golden Highway, Marty Stuart and Zach Top. In 2023, WME expanded in music beyond mainstream country, acquiring Red 11 Music and True Grit, which brought artists such as Charles Wesley Godwin and Cody Jinks into the fold.

Williams began his agency career over two decades ago in the William Morris mailroom, ascending the ranks and transitioning to WME in the 2009 merger. Earlier this year, he was featured in *Billboard*'s 2024 Power 100 list and won his third talent agent of the year honor at the CMA's Touring Awards.

"I'm incredibly grateful and humbled by this honor," Williams says. "Our WME team in Nashville is unparalleled, and I'm proud every day to be surrounded by their knowledge, expertise, passion and teamwork. We help and learn from each other constantly. This leads to having the strongest presence on festival lineups and dozens of successful stadium, arena, amphitheater and theater tours. It has been a great year, especially with the additions with Red 11 and True Grit and seeing huge growth in areas outside of mainstream country."

> "Our WME team in Nashville is unparalleled, and I'm proud every day to be surrounded by their knowledge, expertise, passion and teamwork."
>
> —JAY WILLIAMS

DAN + SHAY: FRANK MICELOTTA/DISNEY. WILLIAMS: COURTESY OF JAY WILLIAMS.

The Orchard congratulates

Katie Studley

and our partners on their esteemed recognition.

billboard 2024 COUNTRY *POWER PLAYERS*

RJ Curtis
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, COUNTRY RADIO BROADCASTERS
The Nashville-based, three-day Country Radio Seminar logged a record number of first-time attendees in 2023 and matched that number in February. "This tells me our programming is on point and appealing to a new generation of our industry — the inclusion of our Digital Music Summit tract and richer, forward-focused content the rest of the week, including four sessions covering every aspect of AI as it stands today and several sessions discussing diversity," Curtis says. For 2024, CRS featured speakers included Jelly Roll, Lainey Wilson, Trisha Yearwood and Megan Moroney.
BIGGEST ISSUE "We're on the verge of once again becoming the mainstream genre, with established 'noncountry' musicians/artists wanting to participate and contribute, whether it's with a collab or individually," Curtis says. "I hope we don't gatekeep ourselves into having only niche appeal that excludes some potentially impactful songs and stories, as well as diverse artists."

Robert Deaton
EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, 24 ENTERTAINMENT; DIRECTOR, C.A.M.P. 615
"The 50th-anniversary celebration of the CMA Music Festival, aired on ABC, was a major highlight of last year," Deaton says. "Additionally, the success of last year's *New Year's Eve Live: Nashville's Big Bash* on CBS exceeded our expectations as the highest-rated country music program of 2023." The latter show, co-hosted by Elle King and *Entertainment Tonight*'s Rachel Smith, was a five-hour broadcast featuring more than 50 performers, including Kane Brown, Carly Pearce, Cody Johnson, Blake Shelton and Morgan Wallen. The countdown to midnight concluded with a music note drop at the Bicentennial Mall stage in Nashville.
COUNTRY MUSIC IN A WORD "Universal. The impact of country music is felt all around the world and continues to grow substantially, especially internationally."

Leslie Fram
SENIOR VP OF MUSIC AND TALENT, CMT/PARAMOUNT
As diversity and female representation remain major issues that affect country music, Fram is proud of the network's *CMT Smashing Glass: A Celebration of the Groundbreaking Women of Music*, which premiered in November. The show is "our new tentpole event celebrating groundbreaking women in music," Fram says, "honoring icons Patti LaBelle and Tanya Tucker — alongside tributes to Aretha Franklin, Sinéad O'Connor and Tina Turner — with a diverse slate of performances including Amber Riley, The War and Treaty, Mickey Guyton, Ledisi and more." CMT also celebrated the 11th year of its Next Women of Country franchise "providing female artists with unprecedented exposure," Fram adds.
COUNTRY MUSIC IN A WORD "Some will say 'hot' and others will say 'crisis.' "

Rod Phillips
EXECUTIVE VP OF PROGRAMMING FOR IHEARTCOUNTRY, IHEARTMEDIA
Bobby Bones
VP/CREATIVE DIRECTOR, IHEARTCOUNTRY; HOST, *THE BOBBY BONES SHOW*, *COUNTRY TOP 30 WITH BOBBY BONES* AND *BOBBYCAST*, IHEARTMEDIA; EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, *WOMEN OF IHEARTCOUNTRY*, IHEARTMEDIA
Gator Harrison
IHEARTCOUNTRY BRAND COORDINATOR/SENIOR VP OF PROGRAMMING FOR NASHVILLE, IHEARTMEDIA
As part of his many responsibilities for iHeartMedia, Harrison oversees the company's cluster of stations in Nashville, which includes the day-to-day programming of country powerhouse WSIX (The Big 98) Nashville. Harrison also serves as brand coordinator for the entire iHeartCountry team, which has over 145 country radio stations across the United States. He says iHeart's top accomplishments in the past year include two of its country stations winning station of the year from the ACM and CMA and helping Nashville families affected by the 2023 Covenant School shooting raise over $600,000. "These are the only moments that really matter," he says.
NASHVILLE CHARITY I SUPPORT "I'm a St. Jude uncle," Harrison says, "and forever dedicated to the mission and vision of the St. Jude Children's Research Hospital for saving the life of my nephew Axl."

Tim Roberts
VP OF PROGRAMMING/COUNTRY FORMAT CAPTAIN, AUDACY
Mark Anderson
REGIONAL VP OF PROGRAMMING FOR COUNTRY, AUDACY
Chris Michaels
REGIONAL BRAND MANAGER FOR COUNTRY, AUDACY
As a veteran radio programmer, Roberts oversees major-market outlets such as WUSN (US99) Chicago, KSON (103.7 KSON) San Diego, KMLE (Country 107.9) Phoenix and KILT (100.3 The Bull) Houston and handles day-to-day programming for a cluster of stations in his Detroit hometown, including WYCD (99.5). "I am super proud that eight of our Audacy country brands were recently recognized and nominated for ACM Awards" for radio station of the year in multiple categories, Roberts says. "This is a credit to our brand managers who lead the charge in serving their local communities." Because attracting younger fans who stream more is a challenge, "our job is to get them to consume our brands more, regardless of the method or platform," he adds.

STREAMING

Margaret Hart
HEAD OF NASHVILLE LABEL AND INDUSTRY RELATIONS, YOUTUBE
Copeland Issacson
HEAD OF ARTIST PARTNERSHIPS, NASHVILLE, YOUTUBE
Bridging the fast-growing worlds of short-form content and country music, YouTube Shorts launched a brand activation with Fritos tied to *Billboard* chart-topping country star Thomas Rhett's *Twenty Number Ones* album. With appearances from fellow country stars such as BRELAND and Megan Moroney, the activation spawned 31 pieces of content of varying lengths, drawing millions of views. "We have [also] worked closely with artists like Jelly Roll to implement a strong Shorts strategy into their album rollout to engage fans and give a little behind-the-scenes access," Hart says.
BIGGEST ISSUE Seeing this as more of an opportunity than an issue, Hart says a wider range of labels is signing country acts. "We have a lot more eyes on the genre and a lot more competition," she says. "This is currently having a decentralizing effect on the genre to a degree, but ultimately, I think it is going to broaden the genre and expand our reach."

In November, *CMT Smashing Glass: A Celebration of the Groundbreaking Women of Music* honored **Patti LaBelle** (left) and **Tanya Tucker**.

JASON KEMPIN/GETTY IMAGES

CONGRATULATIONS
LAINEY WILSON
FOR BEING NAMED THIS YEAR'S RECORD BREAKER HONOREE

AND CONGRATULATIONS TO ALL OF OUR 2024
BILLBOARD COUNTRY POWER PLAYER HONOREES!

CORAN CAPSHAW
KERRI EDWARDS
MARY HILLIARD HARRINGTON
MANDELYN MONCHICK
ZACH SUTTON

FROM YOUR FRIENDS AND FAMILY AT

RED LIGHT
MANAGEMENT

LEGEND

LINDA MARTELL

The pioneering singer's brief time in Nashville was bittersweet — but thanks to appearances on Beyoncé's *Cowboy Carter*, she's finally in the spotlight again

BY MELINDA NEWMAN

PHOTOGRAPHED BY GAVIN McINTYRE

Martell photographed April 24 near Columbia, S.C.

LINDA MARTELL's granddaughter Marquia Thompson is running late to launch her 82-year-old grandmother's Zoom interview with *Billboard* — but for a good reason.

In late March, Beyoncé featured Martell on two spoken-word segments on *Cowboy Carter*. Shortly after, the star posted a photo of herself wearing an official Martell T-shirt from the pioneering country artist's website — and today, Thompson needed to run by the post office to mail some of the nearly 600 orders she has received since. Martell's merchandise sales aren't all that have been soaring. Her catalog streams also ballooned from a little under 5,000 from March 22 to 24 to 61,000 from March 29 to 31, according to Luminate — an 1,100% surge immediately following the album's March 29 release.

> **"[Linda] didn't ask for all the politics — she just wanted to sing. Period. I admire her grace under pressure, focus to stay the course and the way she advocated for herself."** —RISSI PALMER

The attention is long overdue. In 1969, Martell became the first Black woman to play the Grand Ole Opry. At the time, she didn't know she was making history, though she was very aware that there were no other "Black guys or Black girls there" onstage or off, she says. She also didn't know that she would receive two standing ovations. "I was surprised," she says with a laugh.

Her breakthrough single, "Color Him Father," peaked at No. 22 in September 1969 on the Hot Country Songs chart; it remained the highest-charting track on the tally by a Black woman for more than 50 years until Beyoncé's "Texas Hold 'Em" reached No. 1 in February. And yet, until Beyoncé helped shine a light on them, Martell's accomplishments had largely faded into obscurity.

"When I was actively pursuing country music 14 years ago, I Googled 'Black female country singers' and Linda Martell's name came up," says Mickey Guyton, who wasn't previously aware of Martell. "She is truly the reason why I had the courage to sing country music."

Martell released only one album, 1970's *Color Me Country*, but it was a beauty. Her voice was clear and resonant with plenty of twang reflecting her South Carolina roots on the Shelby Singleton-produced set of traditional-leaning tunes. In addition to "Color Him Father," two other tracks charted in the top 60. In its review at the time, *Billboard* wrote, "Linda impresses as a female Charley Pride. She has a terrific style and a true feeling for a country lyric."

But by 1974, fed up with label clashes, a legal battle with her manager and the ongoing racism she endured, Martell left Nashville.

"Linda Martell has always resonated with me personally because her story is so many of our stories, which is why I named my show after her," says artist Rissi Palmer, who hosts Apple Music's influential *Color Me Country Radio* program. "She didn't ask for all the politics — she just wanted to sing. Period. I admire her grace under pressure, focus to stay the course and the way she advocated for herself against a manager and record producer who were interested in gimmicks and not creating a lasting career for her."

More than a half-century later, Martell, who lives with her daughter and son-in-law outside of Columbia, S.C., looks back on those days as bittersweet. Sitting in her favorite spot — a gray reclining lounger in the living room — and wrapped in a black and red blanket, she is quick to respond and even quicker to laugh and smile, despite some of the painful memories that clearly still sting. She relies on Thompson, who serves as her de facto manager, to fill in some details.

Though she started out performing pop and R&B, Martell grew up listening to country music and had a natural affinity for its cadences. Her sharecropper father sang country songs around their Leesville, S.C., house, and the country station came in loudest on the family radio, around which they would listen to Grand Ole Opry broadcasts on Saturday nights.

Her future manager heard Martell sing a handful of country songs when she performed at an Air Force base, and she moved to Nashville, where producer Singleton signed her. Singing songs with good stories appealed to her, and Martell cut *Color Me Country* in one day. "That was easy," she says. "I was singing always already, so it didn't bother me. I had fun. It was great."

During that period, there were moments both good and bad. But mainly, Martell recalls, she felt lonely. "Black artists didn't sing that kind of song," she says of country music. Though she says she didn't have issues with any of her fellow artists, no other acts, white or Black, encouraged her, with the exception of multi-instrumentalist and *Hee Haw* host Roy Clark. "He'd make you feel at home," she remembers of her appearance on the variety show. "He would sit beside me and talk. It felt very natural."

It was worse on the often-hostile road. Her late brother, Lee, was in her band and provided company, but the heckling from some audiences was painful. "Most of the time, you really didn't pay attention because if you do, oh, it hurt," she says. "But we heard it. Me and my brother wouldn't [respond]. He'd say, 'Well, they're ignorant.' We came to work, and we knew what to do and what to say. That's all."

After her first manager sued her (over his commission) and Singleton and his label switched their focus to Jeannie C. Riley (who had a huge hit with "Harper Valley, PTA") but tried to prevent Martell from recording elsewhere, she eventually got "tired of it" and left Nashville.

Martell revisited R&B music and lived in California, Florida and the Bronx, where she and her then-boyfriend owned a record store. In the 1990s, she returned to South Carolina, where she drove a school

Martell with granddaughter Marquia Thompson (left) and daughter Tikethia Thompson.

bus and then worked in a classroom until she retired in her 60s. She now enjoys spending time with her five children, 13 grandchildren and 16 great-grandchildren.

As Beyoncé worked on *Cowboy Carter*, her team asked Thompson if Martell would be interested in appearing on it, then presented Martell with the script for her spoken interludes. Martell was already a big Beyoncé fan. "One thing my grandmother will notice is a young woman who can sing," Thompson says. "I'm very, very glad" to be on the album, Martell says, adding that she appreciates the attention Beyoncé has brought to her music.

But Martell had already been reflecting on her story before Beyoncé came calling. In 2020, Thompson began work on *Bad Case of the Country Blues: The Linda Martell Story*, a documentary about her grandmother featuring interviews with Palmer, songwriter-author Alice Randall and others. She plans to screen the nearly finished film locally this fall before a wider release. Thompson launched a GoFundMe to cover the final touches and hopefully release the doc independently in order to retain ownership.

Despite all the hardships and a career cut short through no fault of her own, Martell's response is swift when asked whether she's glad she made country music in the first place: She quickly nods yes. "It's very nice," she says. "I wouldn't change nothing."

Michelle Tigard Kammerer
HEAD OF COUNTRY MUSIC, AMAZON MUSIC

Emily Cohen Belote
PRINCIPAL MUSIC CURATOR FOR COUNTRY, AMERICANA AND FOLK, AMAZON MUSIC

Last spring, Amazon Music launched its Bonfire playlist to capitalize on the country music boom and highlight similar "timeless music that's emotive, elemental and outdoorsy," Cohen Belote says, adding that with its eclectic mix of artists including Zach Bryan, Lainey Wilson, Hozier and boygenius, the playlist prioritizes "the latest generation of storytellers" across genres. "We know our customers love this music," she explains. "With Bonfire, we're making it easier for fans to find and for artists to nurture the artist community that's pioneering this sound."

BIGGEST ISSUE "The discourse around who or which music can be considered country," Cohen Belote says. "The fans ultimately have the final say and will determine future hits regardless of the chatter around genre and what fits and what doesn't."

Jay Liepis
BUSINESS PARTNERSHIPS, NASHVILLE, APPLE MUSIC

Kelleigh Bannen
ARTIST; HOST, *TODAY'S COUNTRY RADIO WITH KELLEIGH BANNEN* AND *THE KELLEIGH BANNEN SHOW*, APPLE MUSIC COUNTRY, APPLE MUSIC

Madison Hanten
GLOBAL PROGRAMMER FOR COUNTRY AND AMERICANA, APPLE MUSIC

Rissi Palmer
ARTIST; HOST, *COLOR ME COUNTRY RADIO WITH RISSI PALMER*, APPLE MUSIC COUNTRY, APPLE MUSIC

In July 2023, Apple Music launched *Lost & Found*, a program that spotlights songwriters and tunes they wrote but were never released — or, as Liepis puts it, "songs that got away." The show launched with a demo of "Dragging These Roots" by Jesse Frasure, Ben Hayslip and Josh Thompson, as well as a new studio version of the same song by Jelly Roll. "In addition to Jelly Roll bringing one of the songs to 'found' status, we had five other 'lost' demos, plus their studio-recorded counterparts, available exclusively on Apple Music," Liepis says. "Lainey Wilson, Miranda Lambert, Gabby Barrett, Madeline Edwards and Ryan Hurd [featuring Carter Faith] all recorded studio versions of lost demos."

BIGGEST ISSUE "Country music as an industry still struggles to push inclusion and diversity in the genre as a whole," Liepis says. "Beyoncé has reopened the dialogue with *Cowboy Carter*."

Rachel Whitney
HEAD OF EDITORIAL, NASHVILLE, SPOTIFY

Tim Foisset
HEAD OF NASHVILLE AND CANADA LABEL PARTNERSHIPS, SPOTIFY

In the last six months, Spotify's Nashville Label Partnerships team has supported and amplified album campaigns from acts including Dan + Shay, Chris Stapleton and Kacey Musgraves and hosted exclusive track reveals for Kenny Chesney and Bailey Zimmerman. And while new playlists like Homegrown and the folk-leaning Juniper launched late last year, Foisset says country music is "everywhere" today. "Country songs are finding homes on crossover playlists like Zach Bryan and Kacey Musgraves on Today's Top Hits or Dasha on Pop Rising," he adds. "Country is reaching more Gen Z listeners than ever before."

COUNTRY MUSIC IN A WORD "Diversity of thought," Foisset says. "Success in country music used to mean one thing — No. 1 hits at radio. While that's still important, our genre needs to embrace new definitions of success."

Spotify's Nashville Label Partnerships team supported and amplified the album campaign for **Kacey Musgraves'** *Deeper Well.*

BUSINESS & ASSOCIATIONS

Lori Badgett
Diane Pearson
SENIOR VPs/TEAM LEADERS FOR THE ENTERTAINMENT DIVISION IN NASHVILLE, CITY NATIONAL BANK

Giving back to the community is a big point of pride for City National Bank, a leading financier of music intellectual property deals. "City National Bank continues to serve and grow the music industry community through our personalized relationship banking and longstanding support of nonprofits and industry organizations," says Badgett, who, along with Pearson, helped launch the bank's Nashville office in 2011. Combined, the pair also serves on seven boards of nonprofit organizations in the music community. Their biggest concern for country music going forward is the unauthorized use of intellectual property. "Thankfully," Badgett says, "many lawmakers, business leaders and nonprofits are working on solutions to protect artists' rights."

NASHVILLE CHARITY I SUPPORT "ACM Lifting Lives is a charity close to both of our hearts," Badgett says, "given their heroic efforts to help people in our industry in times of crisis, especially during COVID-19."

Andy Moats
DIRECTOR OF MUSIC, ENTERTAINMENT AND SPORTS, PINNACLE FINANCIAL PARTNERS

"Pinnacle Bank and AEG successfully negotiated a long-term naming-rights deal for a new 4,500-capacity music venue located in downtown Nashville within the Nashville Yards development," Moats says of the concert space, which fittingly will be called The Pinnacle and is expected to hold more than 125 events a year upon its planned early-2025 opening. "This new partnership with AEG only further solidifies our long-term commitment to the music industry as The Pinnacle becomes a premier destination for artists at home in Nashville or from around the globe," Moats adds.

NASHVILLE CHARITY I SUPPORT "I serve on the board of the Pet Community Center, a nonprofit veterinary care facility providing financially friendly care to dogs and cats in the Nashville area."

Sarah Trahern
CEO, COUNTRY MUSIC ASSOCIATION

Tiffany Kerns
SENIOR VP OF INDUSTRY RELATIONS AND PHILANTHROPY, COUNTRY MUSIC ASSOCIATION; EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, CMA FOUNDATION

"I'm incredibly proud of several pipeline initiatives we've launched or partnered with to provide greater inclusion, not just for artists in the spotlight but the professionals behind the scenes," Trahern says. "CMA's Women's Leadership Academy is entering its third year, while our collegiate development program [CMA EDU] continues to reach a broader group of students that will one day work within our industry." New this year is a touring mentorship program. "Through a significant partnership with Discovery Education," Trahern says, "we're impacting K-12 students with classroom tools that expose them to the many career opportunities our business has to offer."

COUNTRY MUSIC IN A WORD "Relevant," Trahern says.

The naming-rights deal with AEG for the 4,500-capacity venue The Pinnacle "only further solidifies our long-term commitment to the music industry."

—ANDY MOATS, PINNACLE FINANCIAL PARTNERS

MUSGRAVES: MARLEEN MOISE/WIREIMAGE. MOATS: SEBASTIAN SMITH/PINNACLE FINANCIAL PARTNERS.

THE GREATEST FOLK SONG OF ALL TIME, REVISITED.
THIS WORLD IS YOUR WORLD
STEVEN KEENE
STEVEN KEENE
★ AND ★
WOODY GUTHRIE
★ AVAILABLE NOW ★ In a historic collaboration, Steven Keene joins forces with legendary songwriter Woody Guthrie to create "This World is Your World," a stunning reinterpretation of the beloved American classic, and a testament to the enduring power of music and the human spirit in today's global community.
PUBLICITY: RON KADISH, DOG RANCH MUSIC PR RADIO: RICK STONE, STONEY PRO LABEL/MGMT: JASON SPIEWAK, NOBLE STEED MUSIC BOOKING: VAL DENN, VAL DENN AGENCY

CONGRATULATIONS
FRANK ROGERS
2024
COUNTRY
POWER
PLAYER
80+
TOP 20
SINGLES
60+
RIAA CERTIFIED
MULTI-PLATINUM/PLATINUM/GOLD
RECORDS OR SINGLES FOR ARTISTS
45
#1
HITS
SpiritMusic
CHIEF CREATIVE OFFICER, SPIRIT MUSIC GROUP
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER, SPIRIT MUSIC NASHVILLE
PRESIDENT/FOUNDER OF FLUID MUSIC REVOLUTION

Damon Whiteside
CEO, ACADEMY OF COUNTRY MUSIC

Lyndsay Cruz
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, ACM LIFTING LIVES

The ACM Awards settled into their new home at Ford Center at The Star in Frisco, Texas, the Dallas Cowboys' practice facility. "In just our second year of streaming around the globe on Prime Video, the 58th ACM Awards became one of the most-watched awards shows of 2023," Whiteside says. "We extended our partnership with Amazon another two years, keeping the ACM Awards on Prime Video through the landmark 60th anniversary in 2025. We also had record-high membership, with more than 5,000 members — the highest ever for the academy — joining our commitment to expand the boundaries of country music."
COUNTRY MUSIC IN A WORD "Hot," Whiteside says.

PUBLISHING

Stephanie Cox
GM/SENIOR VP OF CREATIVE FOR NASHVILLE, KOBALT MUSIC PUBLISHING

Although singer-songwriter Mae Estes cleaned up in 2023 and 2024 — renewing her Kobalt global publishing deal, signing as a recording artist with Big Machine, performing at the Country Music Hall of Fame and the Grand Ole Opry and winning the Nashville Country Award for rising songwriter-artist of the year from the Association of Independent Music Publishers (AIMP) — Cox worries about "building the superstars of tomorrow." Why? Radio. "Because of market dynamics, fewer new artists are really getting a shot at having a proper radio campaign at the country format," she says. "New artists need to be able to build a foundation at country radio."
COUNTRY MUSIC IN A WORD "Diverse. The meaning of country music has dramatically expanded over the last few years, creating opportunities for all kinds of artists who have been pushing the boundaries of what it means to be country."

Rusty Gaston
CEO, SONY MUSIC PUBLISHING NASHVILLE

Gaston describes the state of country music as, simply, "thriving." That's certainly true at SMP Nashville. The company's writers have had numerous breakthroughs this year. Ashley Gorley, perhaps the most sought-after hit-maker in town, recently notched his 55th No. 1 on the Country Airplay chart; Lainey Wilson won best country album at this year's Grammys; and the team signed and renewed artists including Dierks Bentley, Josh Osborne, Gavin Adcock, Jeremy Stover and Trannie Anderson. Though Gaston says it's tough to break acts in a crowded market, he adds that the challenge is a great "opportunity ... to think differently about how we can best support songwriters."
CHALLENGE FACING THE CITY OF NASHVILLE "Transit and infrastructure to keep up with the city's growth."

Brad Kennard
SENIOR VP OF A&R, CONCORD MUSIC PUBLISHING

Kennard applauds Concord's ability to "consistently have songs impacting the charts" throughout the last year. Along with signing new deals for up-and-coming songwriters like Abram Dean and Lauren Hungate, the publishing group spotlights chart-topping songwriters such as Josh Miller — who recently won an AIMP Nashville Country Award for co-writing Morgan Wallen's " '98 Braves" — Russell Dickerson and Andy Albert. "We are sitting among the top publishers on the most successful country records," Kennard says, "and it's truly due to the team we've built here at Concord."
COUNTRY MUSIC IN A WORD "Wide-ranging. Country music is everywhere right now. There are so many varieties of country music that are originating from so many different perspectives. It's incredibly exciting to see the attention on the format and how all genres are being influenced and impacted by country in some way or another."

Shane McAnally
FOUNDER/OWNER, SMACK; CO-PRESIDENT, MONUMENT RECORDS

SMACK notched several firsts over the past year, including the musical *Shucked* nabbing nine Tony Award nominations and one win, and the cast album, written and composed by McAnally and Brandy Clark, receiving a Grammy nomination. SMACK also signed top Music Row writers including Ross Copperman, Lee Thomas Miller and Sarah Buxton. "Having opportunities to work with that level of talent is a testament to our unbelievable creative team," says McAnally, though he adds that representation remains an issue for country music, which has historically pushed "different" people away. "I am proud to be part of a group of artists and creators that are doing our best to kick the door open," he says.
COUNTRY MUSIC IN A WORD "Growing."

Mike Molinar
PRESIDENT, BIG MACHINE MUSIC

Big Machine's publishing division recently signed rising country star George Birge to a co-publishing deal, and he joins a roster that also includes Laura Veltz (a 2023 Grammy songwriter of the year nominee for her work with Maren Morris, Demi Lovato and Ingrid Andress), Jessie Jo Dillon and Maddie & Tae. "I love the inclusivity of diversity of the music being made right now," Molinar says. "Even if it all doesn't sound like traditional country music, we have always been the genre for storytelling, and there are a great variety of stories being told right now."
BIGGEST ISSUE "Oversaturation of artists. With a lower bar of entry to the market than prior generations, there are more signed artists than ever fighting for the attention of industry resources, fans, radio and [digital service providers]."

Chris Oglesby
VP OF CREATIVE PUBLISHING, BMG NASHVILLE

BMG's Nashville publishing team maintained its strong streak over the past year with hits from Jelly Roll, Chayce Beckham and Jason Aldean, whose "Try That in a Small Town" notched BMG's Broken Bow its first-ever Hot 100 No. 1. Beckham's "23" topped the Country Airplay chart in April 2023 — the first time an artist who solely wrote and recorded a hit has ascended to No. 1 since Taylor Swift did so in 2012 with "Ours." At the 2023 CMA Awards, Jelly Roll received five nominations, including single of the year for "Need a Favor," and won the best new artist award, while songwriter Dan Wilson took home the Grammy for best country song for Chris Stapleton's "White Horse."

Frank Rogers
CHIEF CREATIVE OFFICER, SPIRIT MUSIC GROUP; CEO, SPIRIT MUSIC NASHVILLE; FOUNDER/PRESIDENT, FLUID MUSIC REVOLUTION

The Nashville division of the publisher best known for clients such as Salt-N-Pepa and The Who's Pete Townshend underwent an "exciting year of growth and change," according to Rogers, whose continued production work includes Scotty McCreery's next set. Client Justin Halpin's band, Unions, landed "Rescue Me" on HBO's *True Detective: Night Country*; Lady A and Walker Hayes co-writer Shane Stevens signed a global publishing deal; and prolific hit-maker Brinley Addington (known for songs with Maren Morris, Darius Rucker and others) reupped his deal. Additionally, the longtime song-writer-producer says, "We moved into a new building, expanded our creative staff and watched our writers flourish both creatively and commercially."
COUNTRY MUSIC IN A WORD "Mainstream."

At the 2023 CMA Awards, **Jelly Roll** received five nominations, including single of the year for "Need a Favor," and won the best new artist award.

ASTRIDA VALIGORSKY/WIREIMAGE

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Morgan Wallen (left) and **Luke Combs** were named 2023 BMI songwriters of the year at the annual Country Awards.

ERIKA GOLDRING/GETTY IMAGES

Troy Tomlinson

CHAIRMAN/CEO OF NASHVILLE, UNIVERSAL MUSIC PUBLISHING GROUP

In a time when country music is "ubiquitous," Tomlinson says, "we can't allow this growth moment for our genre to tempt us to take our eye off the ball." It has been a big year for UMPG Nashville's roster, which includes Luke Combs and Keith Urban, as well as writers such as Dylan Gossett, Cooper Alan, Ian Munsick, Tanner Adell and Matt Schuster. Notable wins include Adell's feature on Beyoncé's *Cowboy Carter*, Gossett opening for Noah Kahan, Combs winning BMI songwriter of the year and Urban's induction into the Nashville Songwriters Hall of Fame. Still, Tomlinson is focused on growth and evolution. "The next three years," he says, "will bring more change at a faster pace than the previous 10 years."

NASHVILLE CHARITY I SUPPORT "Founded by Mary Beth and Steven Curtis Chapman, Show Hope is an orphan care organization that helps break down barriers that exist between waiting children and loving families."

Ben Vaughn

PRESIDENT/CEO, WARNER CHAPPELL MUSIC NASHVILLE

While country is having a massive surge, Vaughn says, "Warner Chappell strives for consistency." Home to star songwriting artists such as Morgan Wallen, Thomas Rhett and Parker McCollum, the major music publisher is focused on evolving with the genre as it grows. "We've never seen so much talent writing and recording in country music," Vaughn says. It's important, he adds, to find ways to "innovate and evolve" WCM's offerings as a publisher to best support the songwriters. This includes the company's new initiative, Straight to the Heart, which helps WCM songwriters release their demos, opening up revenue streams and building a public platform for songwriters.

CHALLENGE FACING THE CITY OF NASHVILLE "Its infrastructure. A big part of what makes Nashville special is the ability to experience both city and country life, but it's getting tougher to travel efficiently in the area."

RIGHTS GROUPS

Clay Bradley

VP OF CREATIVE, NASHVILLE, BMI

Bradley says naming Morgan Wallen and Luke Combs the 2023 BMI songwriters of the year at its annual Country Awards "and seeing an organic viral moment happen when they performed each other's songs" was a highlight of the past year. The most significant achievement, however, is New Mountain Capital's acquisition of BMI. "I've seen firsthand their strong commitment to BMI's mission and to the creators we represent as they seek out innovative ways to grow our company and the value of our affiliates' music," Bradley says.

BIGGEST ISSUE "Inclusion, as we are in a historic moment where the genre is gaining new fans at a rapid pace. Our community always thrives when we embrace diversity and find ways to weave together different stories and experiences ... that is what country music was built on."

Shannan Hatch

SENIOR VP/HEAD OF NASHVILLE CREATIVE, SESAC

SESAC's Nashville-based creative team "has continued to have several successful songwriters reach the top of the country charts, with multiple songs hitting No. 1 in 2023," including "Bury Me in Georgia" (written by Josh Hoge and Matt McGinn, as well as Jordan Schmidt and Kane Brown, who also recorded the track), which topped the Country Airplay chart, Hatch says. "Additionally, our songwriters based in Nashville have continued to have more and more crossover success," including hits like "Tennessee Orange," recorded and co-written by Megan Moroney, and "Thank God," co-written by Christian Stalnecker, Josh Hoge, Kyle Fishman, Jaxson Free and Jared Mullins and recorded by Kane Brown and Katelyn Brown.

BIGGEST ISSUE "We need to make sure laws are continuing to change to ensure songwriters are paid fairly."

Mike Sistad

VP OF NASHVILLE OPERATIONS, ASCAP

Changes in the performing rights organization sector over the last year gave ASCAP a major distinction: "We are now the only PRO that operates on a not-for-profit basis," Sistad says. "We don't have shareholders. We don't have private equity investors. Our songwriters, composers and publishers get paid first." In 2023, ASCAP collected a record-breaking $1.7 billion in revenue, which was up 14.1% from the previous year. ASCAP paid $1.6 billion of that revenue in royalties to its members. That excitement is tempered by industry-wide concerns about AI. "We have to make sure music creators' works and livelihoods are protected," he adds.

NASHVILLE CHARITY I SUPPORT "Operation Song. The organization helps military members — past and present — share their stories through writing songs with professional songwriters."

CONTRIBUTORS

TREVOR ANDERSON, JIM ASKER, NEFERTITI AUSTIN, KATIE BAIN, DAVE BROOKS, ANNA CHAN, ED CHRISTMAN, JANINE COVENEY, STEPHEN DAW, KYLE DENNIS, ELIZABETH DILTS MARSHALL, CHRIS EGGERTSEN, DEBORAH EVANS PRICE, ERIC FRANKENBERG, PAUL GREIN, RAQUELLE "ROCKI" HARRIS, LYNDSEY HAVENS, GIL KAUFMAN, STEVE KNOPPER, ELIAS LEIGHT, TAYLOR MIMS, MELINDA NEWMAN, JESSICA NICHOLSON, ISABELA RAYGOZA, KRISTIN ROBINSON, TOM ROLAND, CRYSTAL SHEPEARD, ANDREW UNTERBERGER

METHODOLOGY

Billboard's Country Power Players list recognizes executives driving the success of the country music genre over the past year, within the sectors shown. Nominations for all of *Billboard*'s industry-sourced executive lists open no less than 150 days in advance of publication, and a submission link is sent by request before the nomination period. (Please email thom.duffy@billboard.com for inclusion on the email list for nomination links and for how to obtain an editorial calendar.) Honorees were chosen by editors based on factors including their industry impact, as measured by *Billboard* charts; sales and streaming performance; market share; revenue or, where not available, *Billboard* revenue estimates, which may be aided by company guidance; social media impressions; and radio audiences reached, using data available as of April 1. Where required, U.S. record-label market share was consulted using Luminate's current market share for albums, plus track-equivalent and streaming-equivalent album consumption and *Billboard*'s quarterly top 10 publisher rankings. Unless otherwise noted, Billboard Boxscore and Luminate are the sources for tour grosses and sales/streaming data, respectively. Luminate is also the source for radio audience metrics. The source for radio metrics is monitored station airplay from Mediabase provided by Luminate.

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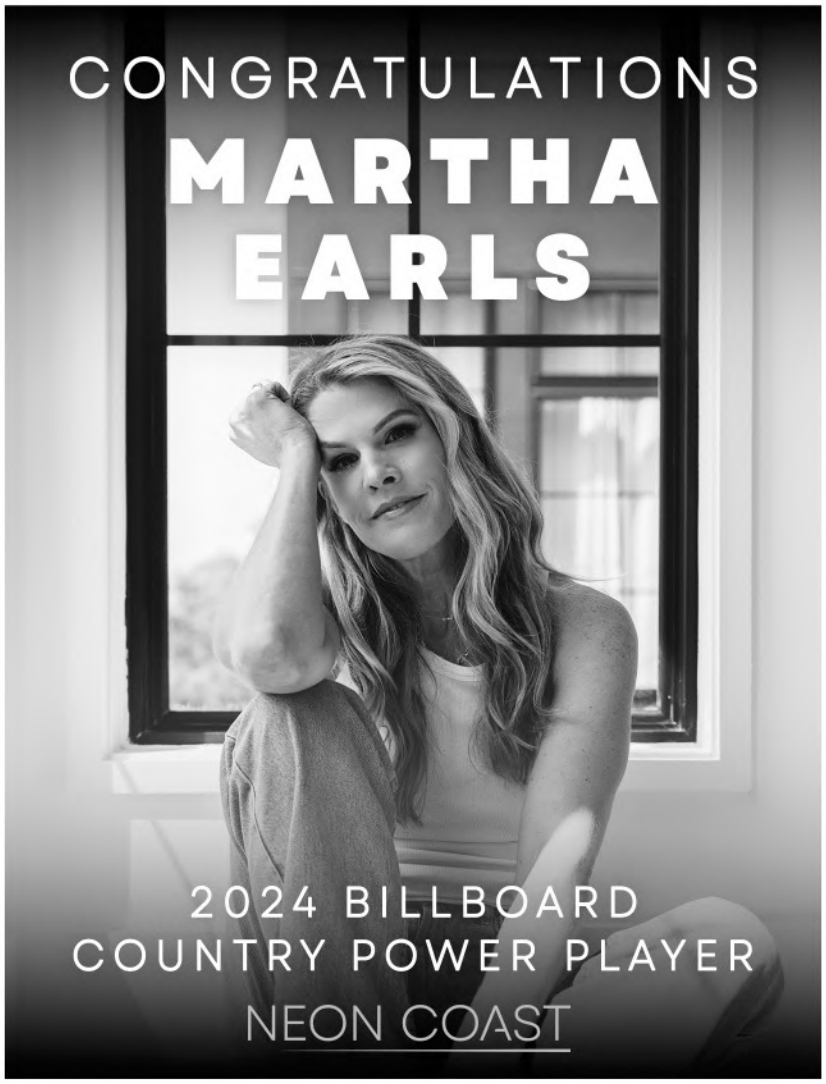
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40 UNDER 40

On June 1st, *Billboard* will publish its annual 40 Under 40 Issue, celebrating the next generation of leaders in the music industry. This issue will profile 40 power players who are making their mark in music, touring and live entertainment.

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ON SALE : 6/1
Issue Close: 5/21
Materials Due: 5/23

CONTACT

East Coast/Midwest: Joe Maimone | joe.maimone@billboard.com

Southeast: Lee Ann Photoglo | laphotoglo@gmail.com

Latin: Marcia Olival | marciaolival29@gmail.com

Touring & West Coast: Cynthia Mellow | cmellow615@gmail.com

International: Ryan O'Donnell | rodonnell@pmc.com

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2024

INDIE
LABEL POWER PLAYERS

On June 8th, *Billboard* will publish its annual Indie Label Power Players List. This special feature in advance of A2IM Indie Week (6/10-6/14) and the 14th Annual Libera Awards will profile leading executives at top independent record labels, publishing companies and distribution companies. Positioning themselves as the driving force behind the success of independent music, these executives contribute to the independent music sector and to the world of music at large.

Take this opportunity to advertise and congratulate this year's 2024 Indie Label Power Players.

CONTACTS

East Coast/Midwest: Joe Maimone | joe.maimone@billboard.com

Southeast: Lee Ann Photoglo | laphotoglo@gmail.com

Latin: Marcia Olival | marciaolival29@gmail.com

Touring & West Coast: Cynthia Mellow | cmellow615@gmail.com

International: Ryan O'Donnell | rodonnell@pmc.com

ISSUE DATE 6/8 | AD CLOSE 5/28 | MATERIALS DUE 5/30

Dasha photographed April 25 at The Comedy Chateau in Los Angeles.

DASHA

How booting a lover led the country-pop artist to a breakout hit with "Austin"

BY JESSICA NICHOLSON

PHOTOGRAPHED BY ASHLEY OSBORN

"'Austin' was written out of a lot of rage," says singer-songwriter Dasha, 24, recalling a session in early 2023 for her breakout smash, during which she poured out a personal story of a tumultuous relationship. "Austin" exudes irresistible dance grooves while defiantly detailing the country-pop artist hightailing it to Los Angeles and leaving her no-good lover a drunken mess in Texas. Though she says she had never been to the state's capital at the time, "the emotions that drove the story were real." The independent release — the second single from second album *What Happens Now?*, which arrived in February — has likewise resonated with listeners. It became Dasha's first Billboard Hot 100 entry in March, since reaching a No. 28 high, and hit No. 3 on Hot Country Songs.

Born Dasha Novotny, the San Luis Obispo, Calif., native started performing at local coffee shops when she was 10. Three years later, her father gifted her a professional studio session for her birthday to record one of her original songs. "That experience at such a young age was pivotal," she says. "I feel like I got an internship to my artistry." After finishing high school, Dasha attended Belmont University in Nashville, though she dropped out in 2020 amid the pandemic to focus on her music career. Over the next few years, she independently released singles, an EP and debut album *Dirty Blonde*, but it wasn't until "Austin" that listeners flocked en masse.

Even before the song's release, it resonated with Type A Management's Alex Lunt, who has managed Dasha's brother's band, Beauty School Dropout, for years. "I had been working in the urban space and in rock, but I wanted to work in country," he says. After Dasha's brother sent Lunt a few of her demos, including "Austin," he soon became her manager as well. Prior to the track's arrival, Lunt connected Dasha with indie label Version III and PR firm King Publicity as she choreographed a line dance timed to the song's chorus. She worked with a handful of influencers, such as Zoey Aune, to create short-form videos to broaden the song's reach. "The goal was to target very specific demographics upfront: the female country audience," Lunt says.

As Lunt now recalls, a video with Aune in early February that showed her dancing with Dasha "started the massive tidal wave." (It has 29.4 million views on TikTok to date.) A week later, Dasha posted herself line dancing in a corral, garnering 68.5 million views so far on the platform. The surge for "Austin" on social media sparked a label frenzy, with Dasha signing with Warner Records in March. As the single continues to build, the team is promoting it to country radio — and eyeing a global push. "Austin" reached a No. 23 high on the Billboard Global Excl. U.S. chart on April 27, with Lunt revealing the team has since targeted Scandinavian, German and Australian creators. "I think the magic of this new country sound is that I can incorporate those big pop hooks," Dasha says. "The first time you listen to it, you can sing it back. I think that's why it's working so well overseas."

While Dasha works on a deluxe version of *What Happens Now?*, she believes the biggest opportunity to expose the song is performing it live: "Now that I finally have an audience listening, we can spend the time and energy and make this into something really magical."

No. 3

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